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COVER: Orlando Bloom stars in Kingdom of Heaven. *See story on page 20. RIGHT: The fantastic art of Tony DiTerlizzi. BELOW: Vincent D'Onofrio in the surrealistic horror film* The Cell.

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contributors

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JOE KOVACK is a versatile illustrator and designer who's work has appeared in books, magazines, and advertisements for close to twenty years. He is an instructor at The Columbus College of Art and Design, and takes as much pride in the success of former students as he does in his own accomplishments. A big Sci-Fi and Fantasy fan, Joe is always eager to bring the fantastic to life on the pages of books and magazines such as *Realms*. Joe lives with his wife Julia and two children, Paige and Evan, in central Ohio.

AARON SCHUTZ learned how to write as a teenager in Eugene at the feet of Kate Wilhelm, Damon Knight, and their crew of friendly, if contentious story critiquers. He learned more in his hours in their dark smoky den–Kate poised straightbacked, puffing on a cigarette; Damon slumped in his chair, feet propped on his slowly disintegrating copy of Webster's unabridged dictionary–surrounded by their motley, thoughtful community of writers than in his years of graduate school. Aaron is currently Associate Professor of Philosophy of Education at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee.

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By Ellen Steiber

A seduction by stones and the traditional lore of gems

Offer a libation to the dead while wearing white quartz, and you give the dead the gift of happiness. Rubies will pale in the presence of poison while amber will blacken, and blue sapphires will change color to warn of an enemy's attack. White chalcedony will increase a mother's milk, and citrine will increase prosperity. Opal, often connected with healing diseases of the eye, is known as the thief's stone because of its ability to sharpen the wearer's sight while dimming a pursuer's vision, thus conferring invisibility. Aquamarine is a stone of courage and a protection for sailors, though emerald is also valued by travelers for its ability to calm stormy seas. Topaz not only dispels nightmares but cures madness and cowardice. Diamonds guard the wearer against phantasms, sorcery, snakebite, fire and floods; and turquoise not only protects you from evil but from falling from a horse.

© James C. Christensen

The Drac, denizen of the River Rhone, entraps a villager by luring her towards his cavern of crystal in this painting by James C. Christensen.

The above bits of lore taken from Vedic, European, and Native American sources are just a tiny sample of what I found when I began researching *A Rumor of Gems*, a fantasy novel based on the traditional lore of gemstones (Tor Books, June 2005). For as long as I can remember I've been fascinated by gems. An animist by nature, I was drawn to them not only for their beauty but for their mystery. As a child reading about birthstones, the idea that certain gems had certain powers seemed a self-evident truth. To me they have always held the promise of magic.

An ex-boyfriend once accused me of having a weakness for shiny baubles, and I sometimes think that's the human attraction to gems on its most basic level—a primal, perhaps childlike, fascination with what glitters or reflects color, something as simple and universal as the tendency to pick up a pretty stone on the beach. For me that tendency led not only to the writing of two novels *(A Rumor of Gems* and its sequel), but to an entry into a world of lore in which those pretty rocks are also amulets, talismans and medicine, guides and companions, bearers of blessings or curses, the residences for spirits, and the means for clairvoyance and prophecy.

Stones that we consider gems have been part of the Earth's crust for millennia, and humans have probably been ascribing value and assorted powers to them since our earliest days on the planet. We can certainly trace beliefs of this sort through recorded time. Jewelry from Pre-dynastic Egypt (5,000-3,000 BC) incorporated carnelian, chrysoprase, chalcedony, jasper and rock crystal. Sir E.A. Wallis Budge of the British Museum translated an inscription carved on a Babylonian seal dating to 2000 BC "A Douche-chè-A [rock crystal] will increase a man's possessions and its name is a good augury."

A Roman myth tells the story of how Bacchus, god of wine, ecstasy, and madness, became infuriated by an insult from a mortal. He swore to avenge himself on the next mortal who crossed his path, summoning tigers to work his will. The unlucky mortal turned out to be the maiden Amethyst who

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was on her way to worship at Diana's shrine. The goddess took what only the gods might consider pity on the innocent girl, turning her into pure rock crystal, so that she would be forever safe from the tigers' claws. Bacchus wept tears of remorse when he saw the lovely statue, and his tears stained the quartz purple, creating amethyst.

The Roman military officer Pliny, who lived from AD 23-79 and compiled an extensive encyclopedia of natural history, cataloged what was then known about stones, doing his best to dismiss what he considered to be the lies of "evil Mages." Although there's still dispute over which stones his text actually referred to—i.e., it's now thought that Pliny's *Corallis* was not coral but red jasper—his work reflects just how radically what we call science can change. In his careful culling of fact from superstition, Pliny dismissed the notion that amethysts cure drunkenness while stating that *Adamas*, the diamond, would "prevail over poisons" and drive fear from the mind. Much of what was written after Pliny—from the medieval and Renaissance lapidariums through C.W. King's 1867 treatise, *The Natural History of Gems or Decorative Stones*—either supported, disproved, or merely tried to identify what it was that Pliny wrote about.

The beliefs about a gem's value, influence, and innate powers are highly specific, and influenced by the time, place, and culture in which they arise. To collect the beliefs ascribed to any one stone, is to often find that someone, somewhere, believed it capable of just about anything. As Maria Leach wrote of coral: "It has been highly valued as an amulet everywhere it occurs and a list of its properties reads like a catalog of remedies for all the ills suffered by mankind, from diseases of mind and body to ravages of the elements."

Jade, for example, has long been revered in China, where it was considered a stone of good fortune and divine blessing, the literal condensation of the air between Heaven and earth that not only bridged the two realms but served as a direct link to the ancestors. Ancestral halls held tablets of jade that represented the dead. The living would then come to these halls and seek counsel from their ancestors, trusting the jade to be the conduit between Heaven and earth. Emperors used it in ceremonies, claiming that direct messages from Heaven came through the stone. Jade was also taken medicinally in powdered form to cure just about everything from insomnia to flatulence. It was further believed that jade could bestow powers of invisibility and levitation. Immortality was even possible if enough of the precious substance were consumed.

Jade was often considered Heaven-sent. An eerie tale from the Han Dynasty tells of a jade coffin mysteriously appearing in the Imperial Palace. Alarmed courtiers attempted to get rid of it, but found it too heavy to move. Finally, they had no choice but to tell the Emperor of this strange apparition. Understanding that it signified the end of his reign, the Emperor dressed in his Imperial robes and lay down inside the coffin. The jade lid shut at once, and his retainers found that the casket could now be moved without effort, allowing them to bury their ruler in the jade sent from Heaven.

The history of a specific gem is often so entwined with folklore that separating fact from fiction seems futile; it seems far richer to simply accept the stone's history as wound through with myth. This is certainly the case with the long and bloody saga of the precious jade of Ho, which was considered a symbol of the divine right to rule China.

The legend begins with a poor scholar named Ho, who is believed to have lived sometime before 500 BC When he was a young man Ho saw a phoenix light on a boulder and, as Chinese mythology states that the phoenix will only appear during times of peace and will then light on a boulder of jade, Ho knew he'd found jade. He immediately presented the stone as a gift to his ruler, but the Emperor's court attendants didn't believe the stone was jade and cut off Ho's left foot for his insolence. Ho's faith

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was unshaken, when the next Emperor came to the throne, he again presented his jade. Again, it was declared a fraud, and this time Ho's right foot was severed. Undeterred, Ho later offered the jade to a third sovereign, and this time the Emperor recognized the stone as fine jade, and Ho was well-rewarded for the jade itself and for his suffering. After this the jade's history becomes murkier, with conflicting accounts of its whereabouts. One story says that in the middle of the third century BC Ho's jade was ordered carved into an imperial seal – a square of green and white jade—by the tyrant Shih Huang Ti. Rubbings from the seal read "With the decree of Heaven, I possess longevity and eternal prosperity."

From that point on the seal was revered as necessary to the possession of the throne and so became a sort of royal hostage—often the object of intrigue, theft, or outright war. It also had a tendency to periodically disappear for long stretches, vanishing in AD 9 only to reappear in AD 91 when it was found in the ruins of a Han temple. During the years of the Six Dynasties as the jade seal continued to be fought over, the belief in its powers as a manifestation of divine right strengthened. The Northern Chou captured in it AD 575 and from that time until the 20th century's last Manchu Emperor, every Chinese ruler possessed the seal.

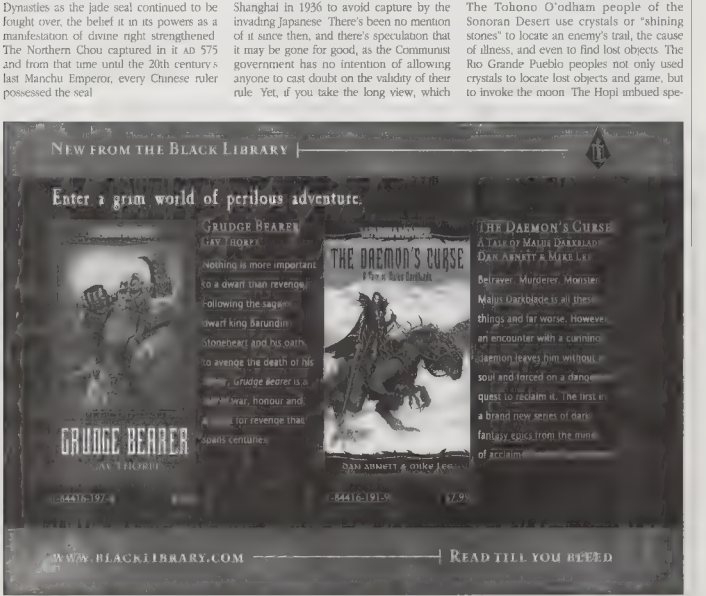
The seal even found its way to the great Mongol ruler Genghis Khan. One legend says that in AD 1189 when Genghis was about to be pronounced the great Khan, he found a lark perched on a square stone in front of his tent for three mornings in a row. Each morning the bird called out the Khan's name until he understood that this was a sign of divine blessing. At that point the square stone split open. Inside it was the famed jade seal.

One of the lovelier legends of Ho's jade comes from the eighteenth century when the Yangtze River was flooding. In an effort to stop the floods, the Emperor Ch'ien Lung threw the Imperial seal into the rising waters as a sacrifice. The gods apparently accepted the sacrifice – the jade disappeared and flood waters receded – and it seems they remained pleased with the Emperor because years later they returned Ho's jade to him as he sat beside the Jade Fountain outside of Peking. The jade seal was simply spouted up by the fountain's sparkling waters.

The last known incident of the jade seal was a record of it being shipped to Shanghai in 1936 to avoid capture by the invading Japanese. There's been no mention of it since then, and there's speculation that it may be gone for good, as the Communist government has no intention of allowing anyone to cast doubt on the validity of their rule. Yet, if you take the long view, which you must always do when dealing with beings as ancient as stones, you can only believe that true to its own legend, Ho's jade will one day reappear.

Rock crystal or quartz is a gem that may not have inspired quite as much bloodshed as Ho's jade but certainly has attracted an equally intriguing body of mystical belief. In the Amazon and Central America shamans use quartz crystals as gates into other realities. As a medium for entering a trance state, the crystal allows the invisible realms to be perceived and entered. In Nepal, quartz can aid a shaman in a healing ceremony or serve as the shaman's messenger, flashing warnings if a witch or enemy is nearby. Tribes in Queensland, Australia used crystals in rain-making ceremonies.

Many tribal peoples, including the Cherokee, used crystals for divining, the stone's natural clarity being linked to the power of clairvoyance. Australian and Oceanian shamans who also used rock crystal for clairvoyance attributed this power to the quartz being a "stone of light," having once been part of a celestial throne. The Tohono O'odham people of the Sonoran Desert use crystals or "shining stones" to locate an enemy's trail, the cause of illness, and even to find lost objects. The Rio Grande Pueblo peoples not only used crystals to locate lost objects and game, but to invoke the moon. The Hopi imbued spe-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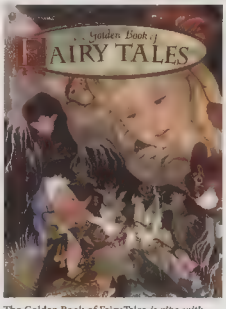
cific crystals with powers to divine the cause of illness. In eastern India quartz is considered a protection against wild beasts and thieves, as well as an antidote to poison. Statues from Egypt's Fourth Dynasty under the Old Kingdom(circa 2600 BC) bear rock crystal eyes that are said to gaze into eternity. Other Egyptian statues of the deceased bore a crystal "third eye" in the center of the forehead to guide the soul to the land of the dead.

II. Gems in Folklore

Part of my initial fascination with gems was purely sensory—loving the play of colors in my grandmother's opal earrings or the rainbows cast by mother's diamond engagement ring. But in retrospect, I think my true seduction by the stones, my surety that they contained magic, mystery and power, goes back to my love of fairy tales. Specifically, I can trace it to *The Golden Book of Fairy Tales*, the stories collected and translated from the French by Marie Ponsot and illustrated by Adrienne Ségur. In those stories, mostly but not exclusively European in origin, jewels decorated nearly every illustration and were woven into the fabric of many of the stories. In Charles Perrault's "Donkey Skin," the princess, who is fleeing from her father, disguises herself in the skin of a donkey and hires herself out to a pig farmer. But Ségur's luminous illustration shows that beneath the donkey skin the princess wears a dress decked with jewels from collar to waist, as well as jeweled rings and bracelets. Even the delicate mirror she holds is framed with gems. What the world sees is a peasant wearing a crude animal skin, but what the reader identifies with, and knows to be the truth, is a royal spirit unbowed, appropriately signified by her gems.

In Madame d'Aulnoy's "Queen Cat," a young prince sets out on a quest to please his father, becomes lost in a storm, and finds most unexpected shelter in a castle with crystal walls, coral doors, and diamond doorknockers. The table where he finally dines with Queen Cat is set with jeweled dishes. Ségur shows us Queen Cat in full Renaissance splendor, wearing a jeweled crown, strands of pearls with a jeweled pendant and, of course, lifting a gem-encrusted goblet to her guest. In these stones jewels are not only the traditional mark of royalty and great wealth but they signify that the hero or heroine has entered the Other Realm, the place of magic where he or she will find what they need in order to fulfill their destiny.

Most of Ségur's protagonists and the animal helpers they encounter are decked out in the sort of exquisite and extravagant jewelry that currently resides in the Tower of London, but the illustration that transfixed me as a child was from the Russian tale "Silvershod," the story of a magic stag who strikes the ground with a silver hoof, causing sparks to fly into air and fall to the ground as gems: blue sparks to sapphires, red to rubies, white to diamonds. In the illustration Silvershod is painted at an angle so that he appears to be leaping toward the skies. The orphan girl Dara stands in front of him, her gaze sad despite the cascade of gorgeous faceted stones falling toward her. Her sadness can be explained by the third figure in the painting, her beloved cat Moura, who is mounted atop the stag's haunches and looking quite pleased. Silvershod has appeared to Dara who wished so desperately to see him, and he leaves a cache of jewels that covers the ground around the hut she shares with the kindly hunter Vanya who adopted her. It snows after Silvershod's visit, and when Dara and Vanya wake the next morning, the only gems left are those that Vanya scooped into his hat. They're riches enough to keep both Dara and Vanya for the rest of their days, but Silvershod, a creature of true, ephemeral magic, has extracted a price: Moura has gone with him, never to return.



The Golden Book of Fairy Tales *is ripe with examples of jewels and gems in folklore.*

The story of Silvershod—and Ségur's glorious illustration which mixed childhood innocence with the beauty of the wild, the magic of gems, and the sorrow of loss—haunted me for years. I wound up retelling and expanding on it in *A Rumor of Gems*, and as I continued with my research I looked for more on the story. What I found was *The Malachite Casket: Tales from the Urals* by Pavel Baszhov, which consists of folktales Bazhov heard as boy in the 1890s when the copper smelting industry in the Urals was shutting down. The stories form a cycle of loosely connected tales centering on impoverished miners at the mercy of cruel bailiffs and greedy landlords. Although the stories are filled with magic, they have a dark, oppressive air to them. This isn't the glittering world of Ponsot's French court stories, but a homely, hard-scrabble world where the characters lead arduous lives only occasionally brightened by dreams of earthly miracles. Those miracles, of course, come from the stones.

The miraculous or faery element in these stories often takes the form of the Mistress of the Copper Mountain, also known as "Stone Girl," and the "Malachite Girl." A guardian of the riches of the earth, she rewards and protects some, tricks and punishes others. In general, she is offended by violence in her domain, is hostile to the gentry and government officials, and has no great fondness for the church. She's part of an older world and most often manifests to those who work the earth, leading one lucky worker to find huge chunks of malachite or showing an ailing prospector where to pan for gold. Wearing robes of malachite she resides in underground chambers with wall of malachite, lapis lazuli, gardens where the trees and even the grass are made of stone, and the light coming from golden serpents. In one story, she keeps Danilo the Master Craftsman in her domain, much as the Queen of Faery kept Tam Lin and Thomas the Rhymer. In another story she entombs a wicked bailiff in stone. Bazhov's foreward in the Hutchinson & Co. edition explains that these stories were believed by both the workers and their corrupt employers. While the workers gave the Mistress credit for their finds, they also used her to escape floggings by keeping the illiterate mine officials in fear of angering her.

As for "Silvershod," that story, too, appears in the Bazhov tales, though in a somewhat homelier version, called "Silver Hoof." In it, the old hunter is named Kokovanya, the girl Danonka, and her cat Murionka. The basic outline of the story remains the same except for one rather major detail. Silver Hoof himself is no stag, but a forest goat.

India's ancient Vedic texts offer a number of stones which explain the origins of gems. One tale says that gems were created from the divine light of the planets. The story I've seen most often, from the *Garuda Purana*, is a somewhat macabre tale which begins with the demon king Bali (or Vala) becoming invincible through his austerity, and defeating all the gods who lived in heaven. Indra, the god of thunder, remedied this by tricking the demon king into offering himself as a sacrifice. The gods and demigods then sacrificed Bali, and because Bali had offered himself with benevolence, he became pure and his severed body parts fell to earth as gems. Drops of Bali's blood became rubies; his teeth, pearls; his eyes, blue sapphires; his skin, yellow sapphires; his semen, hessonite garnet; his intestines, coral; his bright green bile, emeralds; his bones, diamonds; his body fat either quartz or jade, depending on the version of the tale, and perhaps most bizarre of all, his war

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cry became cat's eye gems

Anubhut Yogmala, a scripture on healing, then draws correspondences between Bali's body parts and cures for specific parts of the body For example. Diamonds, which were Bali's bones, can be used to heal bone diseases, rubies, which were Bali's blood are said to cure and purify blood diseases, the yellow and white sapphires that came from the demon's skin cures skin disease and leprosy; and lapis lazuli, which was transformed from the demon's own radiance, is used to treat jaundice and improve sight.

A story detailing the origin of turquoise comes from the Pima Indians of the Casa Grande area Their legend tells of Chief Morning Green who found a cache of turquoise by digging where a blue-tailed lizard had disappeared into the ground The turquoise was so beautiful and abundant, and Morning Green distributed so many stones among his people, that Sun in the East heard of this and sent his Parrot to get some Parrot obliged, first playing a series of tricks on the Pima chief, then swallowing many turquoise beads and later vomiting them up for his master—which is why the people beyond the eastern mountains have so many turquoise ornaments

A West Pakistani folktale, "The Ruby Prince," is both kin to "Psyche and Eros" and one of those stories where the hero is born from a stone. It begins with poor Brahmin walking along a dusty road and finding a beautiful sparkling red stone He presents the ruby to the King who pays him handsomely for it. The King then locks the ruby in a chest and forgets about it until years later when he opens the chest. The ruby has vanished, but out steps a handsome young man. When the King demands to know what has happened to his jewel, the young man replies "I am the Ruby Prince " He refuses to give any other answer and the irate King has him tossed out of the palace. Fortunately, a guard takes pity on him and gives him a horse and a few weapons, and the Ruby Prince rides off.

The Ruby Prince comes to the King's attention again when he slays a flesh-eating monster. This time, the grateful King offers him his daughter's hand in marriage The Princess and the Ruby Prince live quite happily until the princess becomes curious about her husband's origins. Each day she asks the Ruby Prince where he comes from and each day he begs her not to ask, saying he can't tell her. She finally asks the question when they are standing by a river and the Ruby Prince disappears into the water For a moment a green serpent---its scales covered with gems and a ruby in the center of its forehead—emerges and gives her sorrowful look, then it, too, is gone. The young Princess is instantly contrite. Contrition soon gives way to grief and then desperation when months pass without any sign of her husband.

A serving woman finally comes forward and sends the Princess to the forest where every night a tiny king and his equally tiny retinue emerge from a hole in the earth. The retinue is made up of musicians who play music and dance for the king, but among them is one who wears a ruby in the center of his forehead and sits staring morosely into the distance. Spying on the this magical company, the Princess is sure that the tiny depressed courtier is her Ruby Prince. Eventually, she wins him back by dancing for the king and getting him to grant a wish, which is the release of her husband and the restoration of the Ruby Prince's full size. The Princess and Prince then live happily ever after, and the Princess never asks about his origins again.

This story follows the pattern of many of the classic Animal Bridegroom tales where the wife breaks the husband's taboo and must then prove her love and win him back. Here, though, it is not the husband's animal nature that must not be questioned but his stone nature, which is every bit as magical As the ruby is a gem that first appeared to the Brahmin, I suspect the transformation of stone to man is also meant to be seen as a gift of the Divine. "The Ruby Prince" is also another example of gems being connected with serpents, a pattern that turns up in stones from almost every culture

Another gem transformation story is "The Diamond Tree," a variant of "Hansel and Gretel" told by Moroccan Jews. It's the story of a witch who possesses a tree whose branches are filled with diamonds, and who kidnaps children. First she changes them into eagles and sends them off in pairs to bring her barrels of fresh water. When the

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young eagles inevitably become too weak to serve her, she changes them into diamonds on her tree Eventually, the eagles steal water barrels from a poor man named Nissim too many times. So Nissim hides himself in an empty barrel and the eagles carry him to the diamond tree There the eagles explain their sad story and Nissim vows to help them. He does so by tricking the witch, daring her first to turn the eagles back into children, and then the diamonds back into children Finally, he challenges her to turn herself into a diamond Too proud and foolish to refuse his dare, she turns herself into a blood-red diamond, which he plucks from the tree and hurls into the sea Faced with dilemma of how to get all these children home to their parents, Nissim manages to cut down the diamond tree and make a boat of its timbers Inside the hollow trunk he finds a cache of real diamonds. The good man gives each child a diamond of their own (keeping one for himself), and the children all return home with the means to keep them comfortably. There are two distinct types of gems in this story, those that are made of pure witchery, created from other's misfortunes and the real gems, which must be allocated with justice

Trees whose branches are filled with gems also appear in "Aladdin and the Magic Lamp," a story from *The Arabian Nights* Sent underground by a wicked magician to retrieve the magic lamp, Aladdin stumbles through a gem-filled garden A true innocent, believing the trees' pretty fruits to be made of glass, he stuffs his pockets with them, and returns home a rich man

As story cycles go, *The Arabian Nights* tales are as jewel-bedecked as the French court fairy tales, with gems often the reward for both the innocent and the resourceful In a well-known sequence from "The Second Voyage of Sinbad the Seaman," Sinbad uses his turban to bind himself to a legendary bird called a Rukh. The Rukh brings him to a strange island, where the soil is made of diamonds Since the island is also swarming with vipers Sinbad knows he must escape Binding himself to the meat of a dead sheep, he is picked up by a Rukh in search of food and conveyed safely to the massive bird's nest. In the end, of course, Sinbad returns home with his clothing stuffed full of diamonds

Sinbad's island of diamonds is a barren and savage place, but in traditional folklore gems more often signify the Other Realm, the place of gods, spirits, and power. King Solomon's body is said to rest on an emerald isle at the end of the seven seas, and Merlin's body, in some versions of Arthurian lore, lies in a crystal tower.

One final account of a miraculous stone comes from the *Midrash*, the commentaries on the *Five Books of Moses* These tell of the *tzohar*, a luminous stone that is actually the last bit of the primordial light of creation. The history of the *tzohar* bears a resemblance to the legend of Ho's jade, though it's not quite as bloody It's said that when Adam sinned, God withdrew the gem from the world, hiding it away Some commentaries claim that the angel Raziel then gave the *tzohar* to Adam after the Fall, and Adam passed it on to his children. Another version says that a compassionate God wanted to hold out hope to Adam and Eve and so encased some of that primordial light in a white crystal and gave it to them as a source of comfort. Others say the gem didn't return to earth until Enoch ascended into Paradise in his fiery chariot, and the stone was given to him as a sign that his pure soul had been accepted into Heaven. In any case, the radiant stone eventually found its way onto Noah's ark, where it illuminated the ark during the darkest days of the flood. Noah proved himself less than righteous, however, and the stone fell into the floodwaters, lodging in an underwater cave When the waters finally receded, the cave emerged in an Egyptian valley Thus was the same cave that the infant Abraham was brought to, and so the stone passed into the hands of Abraham. Issac, Jacob, and Joseph. It's believed that Joseph used the stone to divine the future and interpret dreams. The *tzohar* was later buried with Joseph, only to emerge from his coffin into the hands of Moses in a most miraculous way. Like Ho's jade, the *tzohar* continued to change hands, disappearing for centuries and then miraculously reappearing to the righteous. Also like the jade, the *tzohar* had powers beyond its steady, almost celestial illumination. A stone of divination and wisdom, it showered blessings on whomever possessed it, and those who actually experienced its golden light knew what it was to be in the presence of the Divine

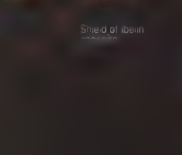
Mermaids offer treasures from the sea in Arthur Rackham's Jewels from the Deep

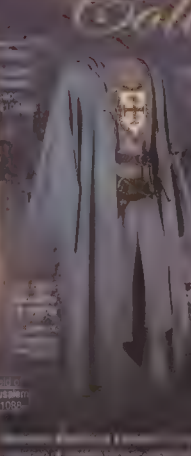
Although there's no proof that J.R.R Tolkien was familiar with this legend parallels have been drawn to the three crystal jewels of the *Silmarillion*, which contain the imprisoned light of the world

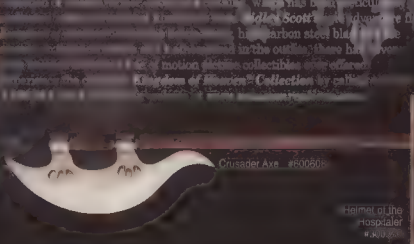
When you write about stones an odd phenomenon occurs There seems to be a correlative manifestation of them in your life. A small community of crystals now inhabits my desk, with others perched on the shelves in my office and bedroom, larger rocks have found their way to the hearth and garden I've come to see that each one has a distinct and unique presence, in much the same way that individual trees do. They are beings As for the stories about them, perhaps these tales are the human imagination struggling to make sense of the magnitude of geology Perhaps they are simply the language of our spirit connection to the Earth. And perhaps, like all myths, each one contains at least a grain of truth For millennia now, humankind has been seduced by gemstones. At the most basic level that seduction seems to be an instinctive recognition of beauty and an almost universal desire for that which glitters Perhaps it all comes down to light itself, without which life on this planet would not exist We are light-seeking creatures, and in gemstones we get to hold a piece of the Earth which draws light in and reflects it back, often transforming that light into dazzling color. As our ancestors have done since time immemorial, we value that which lets light through. ❧

Ellen Steiber has published many books for children and teenagers (The Shadow of the Fox, The Raven Queen, etc.). Her first novel for adult readers, A Rumor of Gems, is coming out from Tor Books in June, 2005 Her short stories have been published in The Year's Best Fantasy & Horror, The Magazine of Fantasy & Science Fiction, The Armless Maiden; Ruby Slippers, Golden Tears, Sirens, The Essential Bordertown, The Faery Reel, and other venues. She spent many years in New York City working as an editor of children's book, and now lives in Tucson, Arizona concentrating on writing projects of her own A longer version of her article on gemlore will appear on the Endicott Studio for Mythic Arts web site, www.endicott-studio.com

The KINGDOM of HEAVEN Collection







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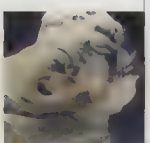
By Rosa Nelson

Crossing the line of perception in fantasy and horror.



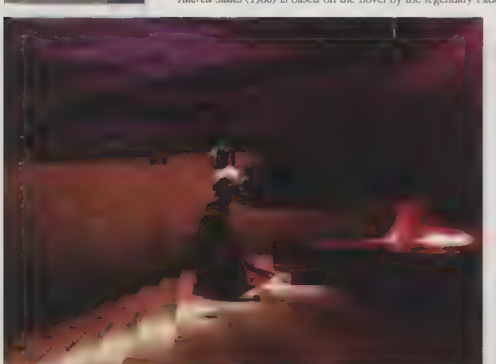
Perception is a funny thing

We perceive the world with our senses sight, sound, touch, taste, and smell We assume what we sense is real, and our brains process the information we take in

But perception is a rich ground for fantasy and horror. Our minds can deceive us. We have dreams that we think are real when we're in the midst of them Hallucinations make people believe they're sensing something that isn't really there. Or people lose their grip on reality, misunderstanding or misinterpreting everyday events as dangerous or threatening

Welcome to the world of mind benders, the movies that explore the landscape of what's real—and what isn't

Altered States (1980) is based on the novel by the legendary Paddy Cheyevski (*Network*), and stars William Hurt (*Tuck Everlasting*, TV's *Dune*) and Blair Brown (*Space Cowboys*, *Random Hearts*) The story begins in 1967 when physiologist Dr. Eddie Jessup (played by Hurt) tests college students in a sensory deprivation tank. Eventually, Jessup takes the plunge and goes into the tank himself. As a child, he experienced religious visions, which revisit him as hallucinations inside the tank



Jessup sees himself as an oddball When he meets Emily (played by Brown), a Ph D candidate in anthropology, he explains his theory about schizophrenia. Jessup believes it isn't a disease—it's another state of consciousness Years later, after they get married and have children, Jessup wants a divorce. He's unhappy with his life and fearful for his sanity if he doesn't make some drastic changes

Jessup joins a Native American tribe in Mexico in a ritual where he ingests mushrooms with psychedelic properties. The Native ancestors claimed the mushrooms evoked ancient memories. Jessup is warned, "Your soul will return to the first soul."

TOP William Hurt stars as physiologist Dr. Eddie Jessup in Altered States. *ABOVE, Vincent D'Onofrio stars in the surrealistic horror film* The Cell.

During the ritual, Jessup drinks a liquid derived from boiling mushrooms and experiences bizarre hallucinations. He brings the liquid back to Boston for testing, which results in blackouts that make him believe he witnesses an acceleration in time. Jessup's desire to understand the powers of the mushrooms drives him to combine his tests with sensory deprivation inside a tank. His altered states become increasingly bizarre, but he's determined to pursue his research no matter how it changes him or those around him

Brainstorm (1983) is based on a story by Bruce Joel Rubin (*Ghost*, *Jacob's Ladder*) and explores looking through another person's senses. Scientists Mike Brace (played by Christopher Walken of *Catch Me If You Can*, *Sleepy Hollow*) and Lillian Reynolds (played by Louise Fletcher of *A Map of the World*, *Cruel Intentions*) are long time colleagues whose invention transmits one person's sensory experiences to another For Mike, it's a bittersweet time; he makes a breakthrough in his career just when his marriage

"A historical fantasy of the highest order, the work of a man who may well be the reigning master of the form."*

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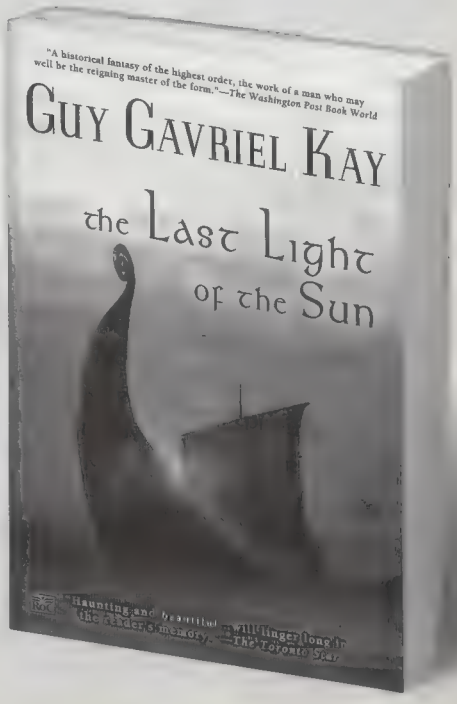
—*The Toronto Star*

"[A] wonderfully imaginative historical fantasy…the pieces come together to weave a dazzling tapestry."
—*Publishers Weekly* (starred review)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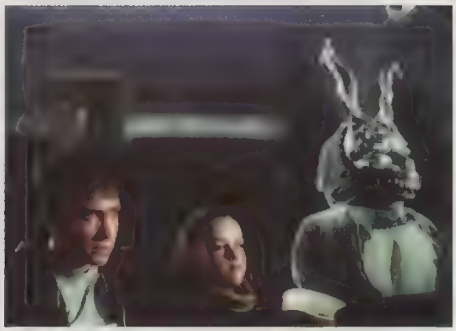

Jake Gyllenhaal plays Donnie, a teen who is warned that the world will end by a man in a grotesque, oversized rabbit suit in Donnie Darko.

with Karen (played by Natalie Wood of *Meteor*, TV's *Hart to Hart*) is breaking up

At first, their research produces virtual reality video games. Anyone can pop on head gear and plug in a tape of someone else's experience: race car driving, riding a roller-coaster, snowmobiling, surfing, flying. When the government gets involved, Lillian's outraged to see her long years of hard work fall into the hands of the military.

After discovering it's possible to record the thoughts and feelings of another person, Lillian is alone in the lab one night when she has a heart attack—she manages to connect herself to their invention and record her own death.

As the government takes more control, Mike fights to play back Lillian's recording to learn what she experienced during her death—and possibly beyond.

The Cell (2000) is a horror film packed with vivid imagery, ranging from exquisitely beautiful to violent and disturbing. It offers lavish costumes, surrealistic vision, and spectacular landscapes of the mind. Jennifer Lopez (*Maid in Manhattan*, *Angel Eyes*) stars as Catherine Deane, a child therapist who works at the Campbell Center where a high-tech device lets her communicate with a boy in a coma. Catherine travels into her patient's mind and experiences the uniqueness of his interior world. As a technician explains, "You do much more than tune in. You become part of the show."

Catherine's making progress with her patient. The problem is, no one knows except her. She can't prove the progress she experiences in the boy's mind, because no one else can see it.

Meanwhile, Carl Stargher (played by Vincent D'Onofrio of TV's *Law & Order: Criminal Intent*) is a serial killer who kidnaps women, commits ritualistic murder, and then makes the bodies look like dolls. He sets the wheels in motion to kill his next victim.

FBI agent Peter Novak (played by Vince Vaughn of *Psycho*, *Domestic Disturbance*) tracks down the killer and sends a team of agents charging into his home—where they discover Carl has just lapsed into a coma, thanks to a congenital virus. His next victim is still alive but will die soon, and no one but Carl knows where she is.

In a desperate measure, the FBI takes Carl's body to the Campbell Center, and Catherine agrees to enter his mind. In the freakishly bizarre landscape of Carl's mind, Catherine's mission is to convince him to reveal where he's hidden his next victim before it's too late. If Catherine falls prey to believing what she experiences is real, she risks getting trapped in Carl's mind forever.

Donnie Darko (2001) has already reached

Kingdom of Heaven

A few years ago Ridley Scott's *Gladiator* made a splash at the Oscars, winning Best Picture, as well as Best Actor for Russell Crowe. Scott now directs and produces *Kingdom of Heaven*, slated for a May 6 release from 20th Century Fox.

Orlando Bloom plays Balian of Ibelin, a twelfth-century French blacksmith who has just lost his wife and child. His father (played by Liam Neeson) is a Crusader who returns from the Holy Land, and plays a pivotal role in Balian's future. Balian then journeys to Jerusalem where he meets and falls in love with princess Sybilla (Eva Green) and becomes involved in the affairs of the palace. At the same time, we see Balien using his soldiering skills to help defend the city from the Crusaders and eventually become a knight.

Ain't It Cool News reports *Kingdom of Heaven* shows the realities of war graphically and accurately. Attempting to keep things accurate from a historical standpoint, Ballan, says director Ridley Scott, "is the only charac

cult status, becoming a popular midnight show at movie theaters. Jake Gyllenhaal (*The Good Girl, October Sky*) is Donnie, a teen plagued by sleepwalking episodes. He wakes up in the strangest places, from the middle of a mountain road to a golf course green. But it's Donnie's sleepwalking that saves his life when an airplane engine crashes into his bedroom one night when he isn't there.

Strangely, no one knows what happened to the rest of the airplane. An engine fell out of the sky by itself, but there are no reports of an airplane losing an engine.

Even stranger, just before the engine demolished his bedroom, a sleepwalking Donnie was warned the world would end in 28 days by a giant, evil-looking bunny rabbit named Frank. Donnie's already seeing a psychiatrist and taking medication, and yet Frank still shows up in Donnie's dreams and daydreams. Donnie follows instructions given by Frank, even though most of what Frank suggests is illegal and destructive.

For Donnie Darko, there's a very thin veil between the real and the surreal, and that veil gets thinner by the moment as Frank invades Donnie's waking life. Is Donnie hallucinating or is he seeing something the rest of us can't? Ultimately, *Donnie Darko* is a haunting story of love and sacrifice.

A Director's cut edition DVD (March 2005) will provide commentary by director Richrd Kelly and Gyllenhall that spells out a confusing story. Additionally, other extras will include: a production diary with commentary, as well as extra cuts that help make the film less convoluted than its theatrical release version. One of the film's greatest strengths is

ter we took liberty with. We had to. We had to find a leading guy." Dark in nature, it's a film that examines the history and politics of the twelfth-century in parallel to current conflicts between Christians and Muslims.

A New York Times article raised some concerns last fall, perceiving *Kingdom of Heaven* as a portrayal of the roots of today's conflict in the Middle East. While some speculate Scott's approach is savvy and balanced, others worry the movie might reinforce some current political problems. With this in mind, it seems that *Kingdom of Heaven* may have the potential to be as controversial as last year's *The Passion*.

With Ridley Scott in charge, odds are this could be another Oscar contender.

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the depth of its cast. Mary McDonnell (*Passion Fish, Dances With Wolves*), Jena Malone (*Life As a House, The Dangerous Lives of Altar Boys*), Drew Barrymore (*Charlie's Angels, Ever After*), Patrick Swayze (*Ghost, Dirty Dancing*), Noah Wyle (*White Oleander*, TV's *ER*), and Katharine Ross (*Home Before Dark, The Graduate*). In an especially inspired bit of casting, Gyllenhaal's real-life sister Maggie Gyllenhaal (*Secretary, Adaptation*) plays his onscreen sister.

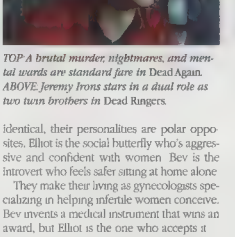
Dead Again (1991) comes with a great pedigree: its executive producer is Sydney Pollack (*The Quiet American, The Talented Mr Ripley*), written by Scott Frank (*Minority Report, Get Shorty*), stars and is directed by Kenneth Branaugh (*Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets*, TV's *Shackleton*), and features Emma Thompson (*Treasure Planet*, TV's *Wit*), Andy Garcia (*Ocean's Eleven, Confidence*), and Robin Williams (*Insomnia, One Hour Photo*). Branaugh and then-wife Thompson play dual roles: strangers Mike Church and amnesiac "Grace" in the present, and husband and wife musicians Roman and Margaret Strauss in 1948.

The story begins with a flashback: Roman Strauss gets a haircut before he faces execution. His wife Margaret has been brutally murdered, and he's been convicted. Journalist Gray Baker (played by Garcia) has covered the case and visits Strauss in his jail cell. Strauss gives a cryptic message to Baker. "This is all far from over." As Strauss is led away to his death, he secretly palms the scissors that cut his hair. There's a mysterious woman who looks like Margaret at the end of the hallway, and he rushes to stab her.

And Grace wakes up screaming. It's a dream that's plagued her since she lost her memory, showing up on the steps of a Catholic school that was once the Strauss estate. The school calls upon Mike Church, a local private investigator and former cop, who puts her photograph in the newspaper with a plea for anyone who recognizes her to come forward. Seeing Grace's only option for shelter is a frightening mental ward at the county hospital, Mike takes her under his wing, letting her stay in his apartment until she learns who she is.

An antiques dealer (played by Derek Jacobi of *Gosford Park, Gladiator*), who also dabbles in hypnosis, responds to the newspaper story. He unintentionally regresses Grace to her previous life as Margaret, and the details of the Strauss story begin to unfold. Worse, it looks like Mike is Roman reincarnated—and he may be fated to kill Grace once again. Mike and Grace struggle between falling in love and coming to grips with who they've been and who they've become.

Dead Ringers (1988) is a David Cronenberg (*Videodrome, Spider*) vehicle starring Jeremy Irons (*The Time Machine, Reversal of Fortune*) in a dual role as brothers Elliot and Bev, who embody the strange communication and connection of twins. Although their appearance is identical, their personalities are polar opposites. Elliot is the social butterfly who's aggressive and confident with women. Bev is the introvert who feels safer sitting at home alone.



TOP: A brutal murder, nightmares, and mental wards are standard fare in Dead Again. *ABOVE: Jeremy Irons stars in a dual role as two twin brothers in* Dead Ringers.

They make their living as gynecologists specializing in helping infertile women conceive. Bev invents a medical instrument that wins an award, but Elliot is the one who accepts it.

When famous actress Claire (played by Genevieve Bujold of *The House of Yes, Coma*) shows up at the twins' clinic, Elliot examines her and discovers she has an unusual anatomic glitch that prevents her from having children. This event reveals an ugly truth about the twins: they often trade places and pretend to be each other—both profession ally and personally—with the women in their lives. They share every detail of their conquests with each other. As one twin remarks to the other, "You haven't had any experience until I've had it, too."

Claire begins a relationship with one twin. She begins to fear he's schizophrenic, thinking she's witnessing wild personality swings. Claire eventually discovers that not only is he an identical twin, but she's actually been involved with both twins, not just one—without her permission or knowledge.

Even though Claire stays involved with Bev, he begins a slow and gradual decline into addiction and madness. Elliot and Bev are seen by others as one person because of their extreme closeness, and that closeness begins to threaten their lives.

Dreamscape (1984) stars Dennis Quaid (*Far From Heaven, Frequency*) as Alex Gardner, a former ESP test subject who's now using his skills to win big by gambling at the racetrack. The college conducting the ESP tests finds Alex and kidnaps him. They want him for a new experiment: when Alex is wired up to a fellow test subject who's sleeping, he can enter that person's dreams.

A machine connects Alex's brain waves with those of the dreamer. Because Alex is psychic, he's already able to enter someone else's conscious mind. That also makes it easier for him to enter that person's subconscious mind—the dreamscape.

Alex wants none of it until researcher Paul Novotny (played by Max Von Sydow of *Minority Report, Intacto*) convinces him to stay. It seems Alex has neglected to report his winnings from the racetrack to the IRS, so Novotny gives the government a heads up, using it as a ploy to manipulate Alex. At the same time, Alex finds himself attracted to dream researcher Jane DeVries, played by Kate Capshaw (*The Love Letter, Indiana Jones and the Temple of Doom*).

Alex enters the dreams of people needing psychological help, but he learns the stakes are actually much higher. The President is having nightmares, and the fate of the nation depends on what happens in the President's dreams. As the dreams Alex enters become more dangerous, he can't help but think about the old wives' tale: when you dream of your own death, you die in real life.

Some of the dreams Alex enters are funny, poignant, and realistic. A steelworker dreams of falling. A insecure man dreams his wife is having sex with everyone else but him. Other dreams are rich in fantasy images. Despite the low-tech effects, Dreamscape's special effects are creepy and haunting.

eXistenZ (1999), written and directed by David Cronenberg, revolves around Allegra Geller (played by Jennifer Jason Leigh of *Road to Perdition, Misery*), a renowned but very shy game designer.

Her latest game is called eXistenZ, and it's much more than a video game. Each player has a lap-size game pod that's alive, and all game pods are connected by living cables that look like umbilical cords. The game pods look like throbbing, misshapen lumps of flesh, and each player plugs in through an existing spine-implanted port. Once inside the game, it becomes your reality. Your world melts away. The people you meet are either the other players connected to your pod or imaginary.

Allegra shows up one night at a remote church, where her game company has gathered volunteers to test eXistenZ before it goes to market. As Allegra and her test group connect to their pods and begin the game, they're interrupted by a late-comer who opens fire from the audience.

Ted Pikul (played by Jude Law of *AI Artificial Intelligence, Enemy at the Gates*), a marketing trainee, acts quickly to protect her. He steals the gunman's weapon and sprints Allegra away from danger, then tends to the gunshot wound in her shoulder. In a bizarre

Continued on page 86

Military Fiction Author Charles W. Sasser's
NEW break-out Military Science Fiction book!

DARK PLANET

CHARLES W. SASSER

Kadar San, a Human-Zentadon crossbreed distrusted by both humans and Zentadon, is dispatched with a Deep Reconnaissance Team (DRT) to the Dark Planet of Aldenia. His mission: use his telepathic powers to sniff out a Blob assault base preparing to attack the Galaxia Republic, dominated by both amazing insect and reptile life forms, and by an evil and mysterious Presence. Aldenia was once a base for the warlike Indowy who used their superior technology to enslave the Zentadon and turn them into [illegible] against humans.

The DRT comes under attack not only from savage denizens of the Dark Planet, but also from the mysterious Presence, which turns team member against team member and all against Kadar San. The Presence promises untold wealth and power to any member of the team unscrupulous enough to unleash the contents of a Pandora's box-like remnant of Indowy technology. The box's possessor poses a greater threat than the entire Blob nation, for he is capable of releasing untold horrors upon the galaxy.

Kadar San finds himself pitted against a human killer, an expert sniper, in a desperate struggle to save both the Republic and the human female he has come to love. Like all Zentadon, however, Kadar San cannot kill without facing destruction himself in the process . And he has no choice but to kill. In order to save the galaxy, Kadar San must [illegible] leave the Dark Planet.

April 2005 ISBN# 1-932815-13-9

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By Gahan Wilson & Paul Witcover

Two anthologies and a modern classic round out current fantasy offerings.

A while back I came down with the sort of horrible, miserable, totally-repellent cold I hadn't had since I was a little kid. It blurred everything, made crossing the room a really big deal and caused me to wheeze and drip and otherwise be in every way disgusting without cessation.

All attempts at work produced nothing but pathetic junk, diverting social interaction was out of the question, watching any sort of TV was intolerably depressing and so I settled for sitting on a couch and staring blankly ahead of me until there was a knock at the door and the nice Fedex man who is always thoughtful enough to say kind words to me brought me a boxful of review books from the publishers of this excellent magazine.

I opened it and fumbled through its contents without much hope until I came across a copy of ***One for Sorrow, Two for Joy*** (Ace/Berkley Publishing Group New York, 312 pp., $19.95) by a Clive Woodall. The little blurb letter enclosed along with it from the publisher told me it was the author's first novel and that he had written it for the amusement of his children. The cover featured a very appealing painting showing a wise old owl and a plucky little robin bathed in the light of a full moon. I figured it would be just the thing for a person in my condition—and I was right.

Wildside press unveils the first of its 10 volume series. Shadow Kingdoms: The Weird Works of Robert E. Howard, Vol. 1

The book is actually two books: *One for Sorrow*, which is the account of a brutal, fantastic Tolkienesque war waged between an evil army of extremely repellent magpies and every other beaked and feathered inhabitant of Birddom, and *Two for Joy*, which has an entirely different, far more somber tone and concerns the damages and other lingering effects of that war.

Book one is about the adventures of Kirrick, a very brave little robin—North American readers must bear in mind that British robins are dinky little things about one third the size of our own hulking species—who may very well be the last robin on earth due to the fact that the magpies, under the leadership of a loathsome, Hitleresque magpie name Slyekin are engaged enthusiastically in a Nazi style racial purity campaign aimed at brutally wiping out any all and birds which are not of the corvidae. Corvidae, which is Latin for "birds looking more or less like crows and ravens" and a very impressive term you must remember to drop casually during your next hike in the woods.

Kirrick is guided to meet and speak with Tomar, a wise old owl who lives in a tall, bent fir in the forest of Tanglewood. This fine Gandalfian fowl is no less than the head of the Council of Owls. He tells the robin about a far ranging, complex plan of action he has devised to wrest power from the Magpie's claws, and the brave little bird is astonished to hear that Tomar has assigned him the major role in this plan's opening phases.

From here on, it is unceasing action taking place in all sorts of dangerous and exciting locales, and involving encounters with a spectacular variety of exotic and formidable birds. Ranging from awesomely noble eagles in their high aeries to dangerously tricksy crews of gulls in their portside lairs,

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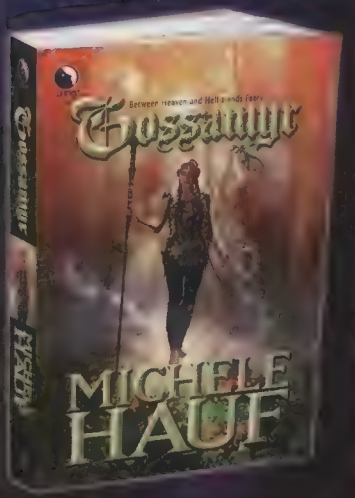

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our hero must deal them all and try to persuade each formidable one of them to join in the old owl's heroic cause

Meanwhile, the book keeps cutting back to the nasty dens of the magpies and we meet the formidably vile Traska, one of their leader's chief lieutenants who, like all good leading minions, nutures plots in the dark places of his heart concerning possible ways to becoming the leader himself.

As the potential conflict builds, we encounter a large number of very colorful non-avians such as rabbits, foxes, moles, and even bugs, though the latter require a translator. Eventually the first book ends with a great conflict whose outcome, following the good reviewer's solemn code, I shall not reveal.

Two for Joy is considerably grimmer than the first book, though that first book is by no means lacking in appalling events. It concerns itself with the vaned aftermaths of the great war in the preceding tale, and it expands its field of action from Birddom—which is now viewed from a perspective which makes it appear to have been a very small place after all—to Wingland where we encounter another army of corvidae, this one composed entirely of enormous crows

Here I must pause, if I am to be honest, and confess that I am greatly in favor of crows and have a great respect for their intelligence, sense of fun, and their tendency to build nests in the highest, most wind blown branches of trees, from whence we've gotten the nautical expression "crow's nest."

I will never forget the great fun it was to be chased across fields as a panicked toddler by these rascally and mischievous fellows; to have them whiz down cawing at my head and then suddenly veer away at the last possible moment with great skill and unmistakable laughter. I also take great interest in their mutterings when they powwow or complain to themselves, the way their families stay together, and how—unlike almost every other species—they watch over their elderly

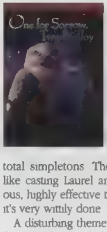
So any comments I have on this second book, in spite of attempts at impartiality, may have little undertones of sympathy for the villain

Now if Woodall had chosen blue jays for this new evil army—the cape-swirling, sneering Vincent Prices of the Bird world—there would be no problem at all so far as I am concerned.

Also I have to admit his basic premise—and mind, he gets it across in a very funny way—is that the crows, from their absurd leader on down, are resondingly stupid goes against the obvious fact that crows are, in fact, as smart as whips

But enough of this carping

It's an odd book, this second one, because it starts out as a kind of amusing take-off on the first one in that the villains, though deadly and cruel in the extreme, are



total simpletons The notion is something like casting Laurel and Hardy as dead serious, highly effective torturers and killers and it's very wittily done

A disturbing theme then begins to emerge from the first book, however I won't go into as it'd spoil too many surprises All I can say is that it grows steadily larger until it finally shambles full onstage, takes over, and results in a climax, and a last line packed with hopelessness, which, I suspect, may have traumatized the children Mr. Woodall was entertaining.

Given that this is his first book, as indicated earlier, it certainly strikes me as a highly promising one Woodall has a wonderfully rich imagination, a great sense of saga, and is a pip as far as creating really interesting characters goes

So, as far as I'm concerned, the mention in the blurb letter of the publisher that he's working on a new volume is very good news indeed

Weird Tales magazine, "The Unique Magazine" was an odd and widely-beloved publication specializing in horror/fantasy which ran from the late-twenties to the fifties The affection it inspired has provoked various attempted resurrections of it to this day. It continues to exert a sneaky influence on the field and any knowledgeable fantasy lover can easily point out how mulutudes of contemporary spooky books, movies, computer games, and so on have been shaped by and/or wouldn't exist at all if *Weird Tales* hadn t been there before

There are three authors very much associated with the magazine who have been particularly inspiring, all of them three-namers. Clark Ashton Smith, Howard Phillips Lovecraft, and Robert Erwin Howard.

Smith's influence has been powerful but shadowy and I think his major and more visible impact is yet to come; Lovecraft has changed fantasy in all sorts of ways but is probably best known for having destroyed all boundaries between the Gothic and science fiction There is no doubt however, that Howard has had the greatest impact on present day fantasy—as Mark Finn points out in his excellent introduction to his book–***Shadow Kingdoms: The Weird Works of Robert E. Howard, Volume 1*** (Wildside Press, Holicong PA, trade hardcover, 206 pp , $35 00)–combining the romantic history adventure novel with the gruesome fantastic and producing a whole new, wildly successful genre Sword and Sorcery!

Also, of the three, Howard has been by far the most reprinted, so you might ask, "Why has Wildside decided to bring out a whole new ten volume series of collections?"

It just so happens I can give you a very good answer for that one: what they are doing is printing all of Howard's work, every bit of it, prose and poetry, as it appeared in "the unique magazine" in sequence. This way people who aren't fortunate enough to have a complete file of ancient yet legible original *Weird* pulps on hand—be they scholars or authors of merely curious fans—will be able to watch the remarkable and quite unique talents of this bizarre and brilliant author take root and grow, and flourish

All sorts of things pop out at you, or at least they did at me, on the first glance through of this initial volume. Two of his best characters, King Kull, and (my special favorite) Solomon Kane, came into view very early in his career for example. You can see him creating and trying out various other characters and experimenting with themes and approaches. You can observe him toying with the angle of approach, see him turning the emotional knobs up and down to in order to find the proper level, and fiddling around with atmospheric effects

Laying the material out this way wakes you up, makes you pay closer attention and—not much of a surprise—thereby helps you enjoy the work of Robert Erwin Howard even more than you ever did before!

Acquainted with the Night (Ash-Tree Press, Ashcroft BC, 370 pp., trade paperback, $26.00) is the third anthology of supernatural stories expertly edited by Barbara and Christopher Roden and printed by Ash-Tree It fully meets the high expectations produced by *Midnight Never Comes* and *Shadows and Silence*, the first two in the series, and maybe even surpasses them

As an artist obsessively involved with the macabre I feel I must point out that the very first thing you notice when you pick up this superbly produced volume are the full color illustrations on its front and back covers delightfully drawn by Jason Van Hollander, an artist I have long admired, who seems here to have excelled even himself.

This fine piece of spooky work shows a number of extremely weird inhabitants of an ancient, singularly creepy medieval town prowling the streets, one or two of them clearly dead in spite of masks and other subterfuges and—just as I write this!—I've noticed another of them lurking on a roof on the back cover, staring at me with a dangerous expression. It conveys perfectly the poem of Robert Frost which gives the book its title and I cannot resist quoting that poem's first lines as a sterling example of how a master chills a reader's blood

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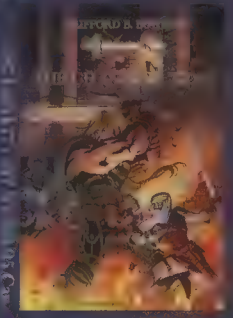

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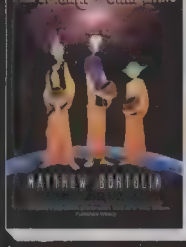

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"I have stood still and stopped the sound of feet
When far away an interrupted cry
Came over houses from another street

The stories are all highly satisfactory—I know it's true because I've read them—but I wouldn't want to tell you anything specific about them because that might give too much away and neither one of us wants that.

True, you may be a little annoyed with me and probably when you wake up in bed, in the dark, and you remember the ending of this or that tale, particularly the last sentence and its implications, you'll wish I hadn't lured you into reading *Acquainted with the Night*

That's to be expected. But the next morning, in the sunlight, I'm sure you'll smile, stretch, and scratch a little, and realize I did you a favor after all

At least I hope that's how it works out

Gahan Wilson

The Warrior-Prophet, The Prince of Nothing, Book Two, R. Scott Bakker, Overlook Press, New York, hardcover, 614 pp., $25.95, ISBN 1 58567 560-1

The Darkness That Comes Before, the first volume in Bakker's *Prince of Nothing* trilogy, was distinguished by its phenomenally detailed world-building, intricate plot, and high literary achievement. Its successor, *The Warrior-Prophet*, is even better: a *Dune* for grown ups. The stark desert setting, in which characters' pretensions are mercilessly scoured away, revealing their essential natures, a religious war fueled by a combustible mix of piety and politics; rousing battle scenes; an underpinning of philosophical inquiry; romance, revenge; covert manipulations, betrayals, the seeming appearance of a long-prophesied Chosen One: it's all here, in spades.

Bakker's harrowing, compulsively readable tale is set amid a holy war reminiscent of the Crusades in its sweep and brutality.

If the Crusades had been fought with the aid of sorcerers, in a world secretly assailed by inhuman creatures as malicious as anything out of Lovecraft. The fanatically monotheistic faith of Fanim is modeled on the harshest strains of Islam, but its rival religion, Inrithism, is no stand-in for the Christian side. Notwithstanding its intriguing parallels to Earthly history, *Prince of Nothing* is no more an allegory than *Lord of the Rings*; nor is it any less of one. Bakker supplies enough theological background to inform the motivations of his characters and provide the impetus for his plot, but he is careful to keep matters of dogma from overwhelming the book. Similarly, while the foundations of Bakker's magical system and the bitter rivalries among the various schools of sorcery, come to the fore in this volume, they do so in service to the story. In this regard, special mention must be made of the Scarlet Spires, the leading school of what Bakker terms Anagogic sorcery, whose magic works by analogy to an underlying metaphysical reality, and the Mandate, the sole remaining school of Gnostic sorcery, which taps directly into that reality. When the representatives of these two schools square off, impressive sparks fly. And the depiction of the uncanny Cishaurim, the blind priest sorcerers of the Fanim, who wield, through serpent familiars, a powerful yet baffling magic, sent shivers down my spine.

The Mandate exists for a single purpose: to seek out and destroy the Consult, the survivving followers of the No-God, a malevolent deity whose previous attempt at apocalypse was barely defeated two thousand years ago. No one else believes the Consult still exists, much less that it is attempting to resurrect the No-God, and the Mandate is widely viewed as a lunatic cult despite the indisputable potency of its magic. Fearing the Consult is involved in the Holy War, the Mandate attaches a sorcerer, Drusas Achamanian, to the great army marching against the Fanim. In *Darkness*, Drusas discovered the presence of the Consult, or, rather, its servants faceless creatures able to manipulate their own forms so precisely as to mimic human beings with a perfection no magic can pierce; there are hints that these vile things are creations of a lost technology. In *Warrior-Prophet*, these Consult spies take on a more active role, striking back at the one man able to see through their disguises, Anasûrimbor Kellhus.

Kellhus is both the Prince of Nothing and the Warrior-Prophet; according to Mandate prophecies, his appearance may signal the Second Apocalypse as well. Kellhus belongs to the Dûnyain, a secret monastic order. Like all Dûnyain, he possesses enhanced reflexes and fighting skills and has been trained in mental-like methods of logical analysis that render him almost more (or perhaps less) than human. He uses his abilities to manipulate the men and women around him, gaining vast influence over the Holy War, for which he cares nothing. His true purpose is to find his father Moëngus, whom he believes to be among

the Fanim. Since Moënghus is also Dûnyain, and has been among normal humans far longer, it is logical to assume that he covertly controls the Fanim.

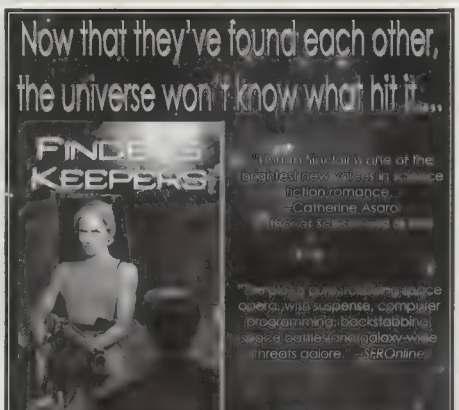
Two things derail Kellhus's obsessive purpose. The first is his ability, based on meticulous knowledge and observation of human expressions and musculature, to see through the disguises of the Consult spies. The second is his cultivation of Drusas. Exerting all his considerable charisma to induce the Mandate sorcerer to teach him the secrets of Gnostic magic, Kellhus makes shrewd use of Drusas's belief in the Second Apocalypse and his suspicions that Kellhus may be the prophesied trigger of that event, subtly undermining Drusas's already tormented faith. In doing so, however, Kellhus comes to suspect that the ways of the Dûnyain are insufficient to explain certain aspects of the world, such as the spies, and he finds his own faith shaken. The process by which Kellhus torturously gains a measure of humanity while simultaneously stepping into a role that he seems—in outright repudiation of the deepest tenets of his philosophy—to have been born to fill, is masterfully and movingly detailed by Bakker.

Even more moving is Drusas's parallel crisis of faith. This fiercely decent man, burdened with knowledge and power he believes himself inadequate to bear, yet who bears them with more dignity than he knows, is the moral compass of these books. What sets Drusas apart is the generous capacity of his heart, his ability to love and to go on loving regardless of duty or betrayal, and this is as true in his turbulent relationship with the prostitute Esmenet (a fully realized character in her own right) as it is in his relationships with Kellhus and others. *The Warrior-Prophet* is a book that demands to be read twice: first at the breakneck pace of the Holy War itself, then more slowly, savoring its art and its heart.

In the Palace of Repose, Holly Phillips, Prime Books, hardcover, 208 pp. $29.95, ISBN: 1-894815-58-0

This unusually accomplished debut collection features nine stories set on the amorphous border between fantasy and reality. Often the backdrop is a world like our own, only changed in some mysterious way, whether by magic or ecological/technological collapse, but the focus is always personal, on the inner lives of characters who are themselves facing change or collapse. Stories like the delicate "Summer Ice," which beautifully evokes the mystery and evanescence of great art, or "Pen and Ink," in which a damaged young artist seeks her missing father with the aid of a malevolent collector, could almost pass as literary mainstream. Others, like the title story, a retelling of Sleeping Beauty by way of Kafka, and the final story, "Variations on a Theme," a clever reversal of a common fairy tale motif,

Continued on page 8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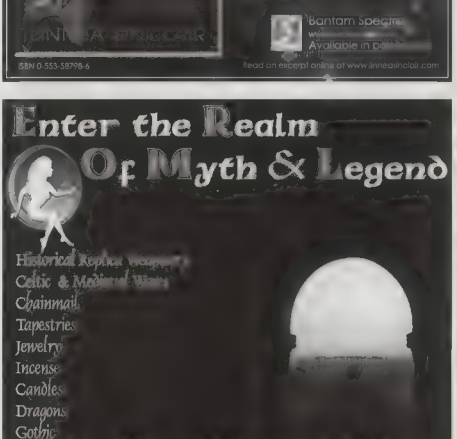

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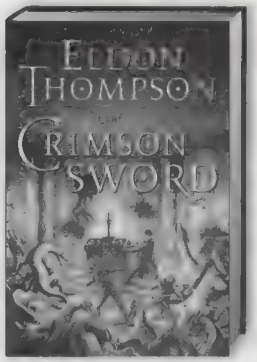

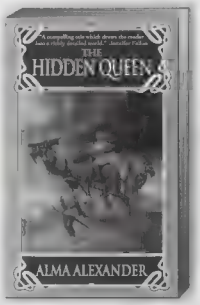

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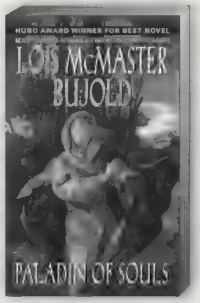

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THE *Storyteller's Wife*

By Eugie Foster

We need our storytellers to remind us of where we've been and where we'd like to go. Perhaps we're not the only ones who need them.

Janie Harper felt strange driving home with the sun so high, the tawny gold of noon instead of the cool, buttery silver of early evening. Ten years of nine to five drudgery, lost weekends sacrificed to project deadlines, corporate double speak, and mind-numbing boredom. All gone

She'd hated her job, hated her days spent watching the clock and wishing the hours of her life would speed away while she was trapped in her cubicle. But even with three months to prepare for this day, her last one, the morning had passed in a surreal haze punctuated by queasiness and a peculiar chill, like her stomach was lined with ice. She remembered nestling the glass-framed photograph of Tom, her husband, into the box the secretary had provided for her personal effects, but not carrying it to her car. And she couldn't remember driving out of the concrete monolith of the parking garage, or if she'd obeyed the speed limit in the school zone, or even if she'd fastened her seatbelt

Illustration by Heather Hudson

At least her supervisor had known about Tom, about their situation, and had taken Jane aside before the pink slips went out. Jane, through her upset, had remembered to be grateful. She had needed the head start to make arrangements, to prepare herself and Tom for the now uncertain future. But even three extra months hadn't been enough time. No one was hiring, not for secretarial positions, not for retail associates, not food service, and certainly not mainframe programmers who needed full health benefits.

And now she was home. Her home, hers and Tom's, with its high ceilings and mismatched furniture, how long would they be able to keep up their mortgage payments now?

No. Tom had made her promise that today, at least, would be carefree—a day of rest. Her husband, soft around the middle, hair thinning on top and too long on the sides, would be waiting for her, listening for the garage door to announce her arrival.

Thinking of Tom loosened the vise that squeezed her chest, constricting her lungs. He'd wrap his arms around her, and she could go limp and bury her face between his chin and shoulder. He would probably be shirtless in the June heat, his skin sticky from the summer humidity. They had stopped turning on the air conditioner, trying to save money. Nowadays his usual attire was a pair of purple boxers patterned with bright green shamrocks.

He'd promised to tell her a lovely, rambling story this afternoon. His stories were so much better than anything the old, sputtering television could manage, or even the movies they could no longer afford to see. It might be about a bold knight on a quest to save his ladylove, or a fearsome creature of shadows and nightmare to haunt evildoers, or her favorite, the magical world of Faerie where seelie and unseelie courts vied in an unending struggle for supremacy. She loved being lulled to sleep by his voice at night; it was the only part of him the sickness hadn't touched.

She sat for a moment within the garage, engine silent and off, the dim overhead light the only illumination. She should take the cardboard box in with her, all she had to show for ten years service, but she left it unopened on the passenger seat.

Tom wasn't waiting for her in the foyer. Strange.

"Honey?" she called.

He wasn't in the bedroom or library. She even peeked out the backdoor to see if he was outside in the yard. But no, he wasn't there either.

She'd passed by it on her way to check the bedroom, her eyes touching upon it and then away. Tom's wheelchair. It was so incongruous it had taken long moments to penetrate. But now she stood before it in the kitchen, puzzled but not yet afraid. How could Tom's wheelchair be there, empty?

It sat propped in the corner next to their tiny dining table. An extension of her husband, replacement for his strength, its legs, its solitary presence was sinister, like finding a dismembered finger or foot. Folded neatly on the seat was a note. Jane noticed with some surprise that her fingers were trembling as she opened the crisp sheet of paper. There, after all, was the apprehension, the fright. It grew stronger as she read the words written in her husband's unmistakable, sloppy hand.

Jane,

I was going to address this "Dear Jane" and then "Dearest Jane" and then "My true love Janie" but none of those sound right. You are and have always been the best thing in my life, and if I haven't been able to get that through to you by now, a "dear" or "dearest" sure as hell isn't going to.

First of all, let me say I'm sorry. I'm sorry for how hard I've made our lives. The medical bills, taking care of me. You never complained, but I knew there were evenings when you wished we could have gone dancing like we used to, or to the movies, or shopping. And I'm sorry for breaking my promise to you. I could say here that I'm doing this for you, removing the drain upon your finances and life from my therapy, my surgeries, and my medicines, so you can have some sort of future. But it wouldn't be true. Simply, I'm taking the coward's way out. I hurt, Janie. I hurt all the time, and though you deny it, I know my mind has begun to wander. I'm afraid of the pain, and I'm afraid I will forget myself, and worst of all, I'm afraid I will forget you. So while I can still choose, and while I still have the strength, I'm checking out.

I know I promised never to leave you. I'm so very sorry to break that promise. I hope you can forgive me.

Next, and I know I'm not in a position to make requests, but think of it as my final one. Don't go upstairs. I'm in the guest room. I didn't want you to find me or see me. Call the police or the neighbors, whomever you like, but don't go upstairs. I would spare you that.

Goodbye my dear, my dearest, my truest, best Janie. We will love again in the next world. I know it.

Tom

The police came when she called them. What had she said into the plastic mouthpiece with the stranger's voice murmuring through it? It didn't matter. The police came and took the note from her senseless fingers, read the tear-smudged words, and went upstairs. They trooped back down, their faces grim and sad.

"How?" she whispered.

At first, they didn't want to tell her. But she kept asking, refusing to let them escape or change the subject until they relented. Speaking slowly and in low voices, as though that would diminish the impact of their words, they told her.

Tom had dragged himself up the stairs—a Herculean effort in his state—with a backpack. Within the pack, a pharmacopoeia: the collection of his pills they'd been hoarding, three months of maxing out refill after refill on her HMO, trying to stock up against when her benefits would expire: a bottle of aspirin, and the last of their vodka. He'd taken them all—the painkillers and the sleeping pills and the aspirin—and washed them down with liquor.

As though to reassure her, they told her that Tom must have been dead for several hours by the time she read his note.

The ambulance came quietly, the siren mute, the orange and yellow lights dark and still. There was no emergency to rush to, no life hanging upon the balance of seconds.

Jane watched the paramedics carry the stretcher upstairs. She didn't go with them because Tom had asked her not to. So she stood, watching the stairs as they brought her husband's blanket-shrouded body down.

"Wait." She stopped them in the foyer, the foyer where Tom had waited for her to return to him every day, his face tilted up to greet her with a kiss.

She had obeyed her husband's request; she hadn't gone upstairs. But she had to see him one last time in their home.

Her hands no longer trembled. Jane gripped the edge of the gray blanket that covered his face. The thin curtain, this death shroud, was her last refuge. Pulled away from his familiar, dear face, she wouldn't be able to pretend this was all an elaborate hoax, a trick. Seeing his still features would banish that part of her which knew, which railed and protested, that Tom had to be alive, hadn't really left her alone. And so the part of her that was his, the part she'd given to him to keep and love would truly die—the best part of her.

She tugged the blanket away.

Feeling the blood drain from her face, she clutched the edge of the stretcher. The cool metal biting into her palms kept her standing, forced the blackness that threatened to swallow her at bay—though her knees wanted to buckle.

What lay beneath the gray shroud was not her poor, beloved Tom. It was a large wooden mannequin, crudely carved and rough. Someone had whittled the shape of his nose, jutting from the center of a face with planes and angles too sharp to have felt the touch of sandpaper. Lips leered in a splintery grin, a caricature of the soft smile she knew so well, and jagged Xs had been gouged in lieu of

eyes. Tufts of straw and dry grass were glued and knotted around the head, the color several shades lighter than the soft brown waves of her husband's hair.

Janie yanked the blanket to the floor. The doll was life sized. They had carved the soft roundness of his stomach but hadn't bothered to detail fingers or toes, just rough outlines at the end of the stumps that shaped his arms and legs. The final indignity or cruelty, they had dressed it in Tom's purple shamrock boxers.

She turned to the closest paramedic. "What the hell do you mean by this?"

Her outrage drove him back a step.

"Where's my husband? You didn't think this obscenity would fool me, did you?"

The second paramedic put a hand on her arm. "Ma'am, I'm very sorry for your loss—"

She shook off the solicitous touch. "What did you do with him?"

"Ma'am, please. I know this is hard for you—"

"Where is he? Where is he!"

"It's always hard to lose someone you love. But—"

"I never loved this. It's a wooden stump!"

The second paramedic gaped at her.

"Tony, I think there's some diazepam in the cabin." This from the first. "We'll bring her some after we put him in. C'mon."

She would have stopped them, but she realized that Tom still had to be there, upstairs. As they wheeled the gurney out, Janie stumbled up the stairs.

Ever since Tom had been forced into the wheelchair five years ago, their second story had become an unused landscape, full of dust and debris. They had migrated everything they needed downstairs for convenience. Unused, the other half of their home became storage. She tripped over piles of magazines and plastic cartons filled with relics of a lifestyle no longer enjoyed—an obstacle course of glossy paper, high heels, crumpled dresses, and knick knacks. Had Tom truly navigated this mess on his suicide pilgrimage?

She fumbled with the doorknob to the spare room. As she'd waited for the police and the ambulance, her imagination envisioned Tom on the daybed within—perhaps propped up on the garish throw pillows his parents had given them many Christmases ago, or maybe lying on the dusty coverlet.

The door opened.

The pillows and coverlet were exactly as she had pictured them. But Tom wasn't on the daybed—neither propped up nor supine. He wasn't there at all.

But someone else was.

A creature—not a man but not an animal either—struggled with the window. She remembered that particular window tended to stick. The creature wasn't big. Janie doubted it would stand taller than her knee. The top of its head came to her chin as it wrestled and strained, its feet planted on the windowsill. It was covered in a thick pelt of rich, brown fur. A single lightning-white stripe ran from its head to its back.

At her entrance, it turned and yelped. It leaped to the ground and dashed on all fours at her. Before the realization properly formed in her mind that it was trying to escape, not attack, she stepped into the room and slammed the door. The creature was trapped.

From the front, it had white patches on its elbows and knees, and it was unmistakably a "he." Its, or rather *his*, face was almost human. He reminded her of the lemurs she and Tom had seen at the zoo, long ago before the doctors and the pain and the wheelchair. A pair of round, black eyes glittered above a bulbous nose. Minuscule human lips curled back in a snarl, flashing sharp, white fangs. Delicately pointed ears pricked forward, poking through a mat of fur.

The creature stood. "Wretched woman," he growled. "To defy your man's last request. Fie."

"You can talk."

"Of course I can talk. Release me or I will send boggles to pinch you in your sleep and goblins to curdle your cream."

Boggles? Goblins? Those were types of faines in Tom's stories.

In a daze, Janie spoke the heroine's reply. "No, not until you give me back my husband."

"He is not mine to give, mortal woman."

This wasn't a story, though. They were talking about Tom, her real husband in the real world. "He's been stolen, then? He's not dead?"

The fairy creature hissed.

Janie remembered all her husband's tales, from the one he had given her the day he proposed, to the one he had told her last night after she'd woken him with her restless tossing. If this was that extraordinary entity, a *real* fairy tale, she knew her lines.

"I caught you fair and square," she said. "You have to answer me truthfully or I'll cage you in a box of cold iron and never let you out."

The fairy dropped to all fours, ears flattened to his skull. "Three questions may you have of me, mortal woman, and three only."

"Fine. Where is my husband?"

He glared at her. "Your Tom is in the glittering land. He basks in the golden afternoons and breathes the opalescent air of Faerie."

The answer didn't astonish her. Perhaps she was too numb or just too plain flabbergasted to be surprised anymore. "Which means he's alive?"

"Aye. Your man is alive."

The part of her that had been holding itself rigid and unbreathing relaxed. Tom was alive. Gone from here, gone from this world, but alive.

Janie frowned. That was two questions down, leaving one more. According to Tom's stories, once this creature answered her final question it would be free to escape, her only link to her husband gone. Unless—

"My final question is this: What is your true and complete name?"

The creature screamed, a long, keening wail. "Nay! Do not make me speak my name! I will bring bee sweets and gossamer rainbow strands to twine in your beautiful raven locks, but do not force me to give up my name!"

"Answer my question."

"You condemn me to servitude in the world of man if I relinquish my name to you. I will fade here and die, bound by the rope of mortality on your lips."

"I know. I'm sorry, but I need your help to find my husband. So I ask you a third time—"

The creature shrieked. "Nay! Will you bargain, my lady? What if I promised to help you on your quest? I would be a true guide and companion. I would take you to Faerie and warn you of its dangers if you would but have mercy. Do not make me speak my name in this cold land of dead dreams and clay."

Janie contemplated the cringing fairy at her feet. "If you swear in good faith to take me to Faerie and help me get Tom back, I will release you from having to answer my final question. But you must swear it by your true name and by Faerie itself."

The fairy crept forward until his nose nudged her foot. "Blessings upon you and all your children."

"Stop that. Swear!"

The creature shivered. "I will serve thee in honor and pass thee through the veil between the world of man and the kingdom of Faerie. There I will escort thee in safety to the throne room of the Mistress of Air and Darkness herself, Nicnivin, Queen of Faerie. It is she who has taken your Tom. This I swear by my true name and by all of Faerie."

She felt a chill, like icy fingers on her neck. In Tom's stories, the Queen of Faerie was a fearsome sidhe, without remorse or compassion. She wielded all the dark magics of the unseelie court with a sadistic enjoyment of its denizen's suffering.

So be it. "I accept your oath," she said. "And I release you from

the onus of my third question."

The fairy kissed her foot and fawned on the ground before her. "Bless you, good woman."

"Mrs. Harper?" The voice of Tony, the second paramedic, drifted to her from downstairs. "Are you okay?"

"Stay here," Janie said to the fairy. "I need to get rid of the ambulance people. Then we'll go."

"As you command."

She paused, her hand on the doorknob. "They really think that block of wood is my husband's body, don't they?"

"Aye. Cunningly forged and seeped in fairy magic is the changeling."

"Not so cunning. I could see through it."

The fairy shrugged. "The eyes of love are keen. If you had obeyed the note I penned and left your man's visage undisturbed until your heart could accept his death, it would have fooled even you."

"You wrote that? It was very believable."

"I plucked it from a passing thought I found in your Tom's mind."

"Mrs. Harper?"

"You'll stay here?" she said.

"Aye."

Janie apologized to the paramedics for her outburst, lied that she had called family to come and comfort her (there was no family, his parents had died two years ago, hers before they had met), and refused their offer to stay with her until they arrived. Almost pushing them out the door, she watched them drive away with the wooden mannequin that was supposed to be her husband.

As good as his word, the fairy was waiting for her when she returned. He sat on the edge of the daybed, a mournful expression on his face.

"Nicnivin will roast my ears for failing her in this. Cannot I convince you to surrender this foolish quest? I will bring you a bottomless pouch of gold. You could be rich and grow fat with luxuries."

"No deal."

"Very well." The fairy sounded sullen. "Remove your shoes and we'll be off."

"My shoes?"

"Your flesh must be in contact with Lady Earth in order to cross into Faerie."

Janie kicked off her pumps and peeled off the thin stockings that covered her feet. "What should I call you, by the way?"

"Call me Hobs." He bounded off the daybed. "Follow. Once we are outside these walls, step only where I step, move only where I move."

"Okay."

Hobs led her to the kitchen door, the one that opened to the backyard. Enclosed by a six-foot tall privacy fence, she and Tom had let the area become overgrown. Janie had never been much for yard work, and with Tom unable to mow, the yard looked more like a forest than a suburban landscape. Towering weeds strangled the holly bushes and usurped the straggling pansies. Unknown vines and creepers clambered over the peeling planks of the fence and sprouted a cascade of violet and white flowers. It was beautiful out there. Beautiful and wild.

She followed Hobs as he led her through prickly foliage and knee-high tufts of grass. Pushing aside trailing branches, long overdue for pruning, they emerged in a tiny hollow within a nameless, thorny bush. Overhead, a knotted canopy of pear and peach trees shaded them from the sun. In the shadows, a circle of toadstools glistened.

"Lift me up," Hobs said. "A misstep could fling us apart, separated by all of Faerie. I do not relish the idea of chasing over hill and dale in search of you." He lifted his arms, looking like a child in a fur coat demanding to be carried.

She boosted him up and cradled him in her arms. He weighed no more than a cat. His fur was soft and thick beneath her fingers, and he smelled musky—a tangy sweetness that tickled her nose. The scent held a hint of honey and cinnamon, but also something wilder, something she couldn't identify but that was still familiar.

"What now?" she said.

"Hsst, shush. I must concentrate." Hobs peered intently at the ring. A long moment passed. Then another. Janie blinked. Had the air shimmered? Like a heat mirage on burning summer days when the baking highway sent wisps of light twisting into the air, the space above the toadstools trembled.

"There," he said. "Jump into the ring. Both feet must leave the earth and land together. Now!"

Janie jumped. Mid-hop, she hung in the air with the curious sensation of the borders of the toadstool ring moving towards her, rather than she to it. A solid wall of shimmering color streaked at her. She clutched Hobs tight in her arms as it hit.

Then she was through and blinking. Around her ankles the toadstool caps gleamed, but there any resemblance to her wilderness backyard stopped. They were in a forest glade, the green arms of oak and willow trees tangled and endless overhead. Gold, dappled sunlight filtered through to dot the air with splashes of light and shadow. Where it struck, pure and unbroken, the light was sparkling, clean, and perfect. The shadows were a deep, rich purple—a color so evocative of enchantments and fairytales it made her heart ache.

Surrounding them in a still, silent throng, were faeries. Sidhe garbed in cobweb cloaks and carapace breastplates, sprites with iridescent butterfly wings, furred goblins with ape-like arms, terrifying night hags, delicate pixies—more faeries than she could name or hope to recognize—assembled outside the toadstool ring, watching her.

"It seems we were expected," she whispered.

Hobs squirmed until she released him. "You did not stipulate that I could not alert my queen," he said.

Janie scowled.

"Let them through." The voice rang out, clear as a crystalline brook, loud as thunder. It was exquisite and terrible and magnificent. Janie knew it could belong to none other than the Queen of Air and Darkness herself, dread Nicnivin.

If the crowd had been human, she would have expected to hear shuffling feet, maybe the whisper and rustle of cloth as it moved. But this glittering and glowering multitude parted to create an aisle for her in absolute silence. It was wide enough so if she stood in the middle of this new clearing with her arms outstretched, the tips of her fingers might, just might, brush against fur or wings or spangled mantle. She hugged her arms to her sides as she marched down the corridor of fairy bodies.

Hobs trotted a step ahead of her.

Waiting for them at the end of this aisle on a throne of solid shadow was the Queen of Faerie. Her gleaming hair wreathed her in a froth of night. Wisps of moonlight shifted and roiled in soundless tides at her feet. Her gown was a gauze of mist that swathed her body from neck to ankle, fluctuating from sheer transparency to modest opacity.

Hobs threw himself on his face before her.

She glanced down at him, displeasure clear on her face. "I will deal with you later, worthless hob." Her voice was ice and winter sky.

A fine trembling shook the little fairy's frame. "My queen," he whimpered, "she saw through the spell, threatened me with cold iron."

"Speak no more to me or I will rip your tongue from your head."

Hobs whimpered.

"It's not totally his fault," Janie said. "The mannequin fooled the paramedics, after all. I'm sure it was a very good spell."

The Queen turned to Janie. Her eyes were black as jet, deep as midnight, and cold as stone. "Welcome to Faerie, Goodwife

Harper."

Janie wondered if she should curtsy or bow.

Nicnivin's gaze swept over Hobs. "This one has told me you have come for your man, Thomas Harper."

Janie blinked. That was far more forthright than the fey ever were in Tom's stories. "Aren't we supposed to play word games or something first?"

"If you prefer, we may. But I foresee the truth of the situation will be better sport than any riddle I could devise."

"So I can have him back?"

"You have only to ask me three times and I will return you both to the world of man, banished forever from my realm."

Janie opened her mouth.

The Queen raised her hand. "Wait. I would have you hear me out."

"There's always a catch."

A tiny smile curved Nicnivin's lips. "Indeed. But despite what you may have heard to the contrary, I am not without compassion. Would you like to look upon your man first?"

"He's here?" Janie craned her head, searching the host for a glimpse of Tom's hair, his face, anything.

"I said look upon him. No more, no less."

Oh. Yes, please."

Nicnivin flung out an arm. Her sleeve of mist streamed in a waterfall to the ground. The instant it touched, it condensed, shimmered, and thickened until it became a murky pool of darkness. Janie

A golden ballroom gleamed in the mirror sheen. Beautiful sidhe ladies and elegant sidhe lords waltzed on marble tile while a fey orchestra played in the background.

stepped closer to see the image that swirled and eddied on the surface.

A golden ballroom gleamed in the mirror sheen. Beautiful sidhe ladies and elegant sidhe lords waltzed on marble tile while a fey orchestra played in the background. Almost, she could hear the eldritch strains of music as the couples arced and swayed. The crossest pair spun, filling the smoky plane with the lady's lace skirts and cascade bodice, and the lord's velvet surcoat. But it wasn't a sidhe lord who waltzed so gracefully in the arms of a beautiful lady; it was Tom. A younger Tom, a healthy Tom who could walk, could *dance*, but definitely her Tom. The lines that pain had carved in his face were gone, dropping years from him. He looked as young as when they had met fifteen years ago.

"Tom?" His laughing face was so close, close enough to touch. Without intending to, her fingers reached and broke the surface of the liquid mirror. The ripples banished the image, dissolving it like sunlight tearing shadows.

Queen Nicnivin flicked her fingers and the mist melted away.

"Is what I saw ready—?"

"Yes. That was your Thomas. This is Faerie, land of magic and dreams. I can and have restored that which the world of man stole."

"He was dancing," Janie said.

"And happy. So therein the choice you must make. Would you take away what I have returned to him? Would you condemn your man again to pain and sickness? Here he will live for centuries in the hale and nourishing air of Faerie. In your world, he has scant years left, and they will be filled with great misery and sorrow for you both. Let him remain here, Goodwife. And as a favor, I can remove your memories of him. If you leave him, I will see to it you will not suffer mourning for him."

Janie sank to her knees. She had forgotten what Tom had looked like before the sickness, forgotten how much joy life had given him, how much joy it had given them both in those days. He could reclaim that here. He already had. She had seen it in his face.

"Why do you want him? What could he possibly mean to you?"

The Queen smiled. It was a predatory, vicious grin. For whatever reason, she had wanted Janie to ask that question.

"Know, Goodwife, that Faerie is shaped by storytellers. Their fantasies, their dreams give my realm life. We were dying, all of us from smallest nixie to highborn sidhe, for want of a storyteller. That little one," she pointed to Hobs still prostrate at her feet, "heard your man's tales as he listened at your window. What he brought back of them revived me, and so revived Faerie."

Janie felt the bile of nausea rise in her throat. "So if I take Tom back, I condemn Faerie too."

"Yes."

Her eyes burned. Tears spilled over her cheeks in a wave of scalding droplets. "But I love him! He's all I have, all I want, all I've ever wanted." Janie struggled against the sobs that shook her body, her nose running, and her breath hiccupping in her throat. She so wanted to be calm before Nicnivin, brave and dignified like all the heroines in Tom's stories.

The Queen reached a hand to Janie's face and caught a tear as it coursed down. It glittered on her fingertip, became a jewel, softer than pearl and clear as diamond. The Queen of Faerie cupped her hand around the precious gem.

"Woman of clay and sorrow, your tears have reminded me of love. I have not felt the delight and agony of love in centuries. For the memory of your tears, I would give you a gift."

Janie sniffled.

"I will let you remain in Faerie with your Tom. You may be together here in an endless afternoon of leisure and delight. Would you like that?"

Almost, almost, Janie agreed. But then she remembered Tom's stories. There was always a price for fairy gifts. "W—what would it cost me, us?"

Nicnivin tilted her head against the back of her throne. In that moment she looked tired and worn.

"Your memories," she said at last. She had the decency to lower her eyes. "Your man does not remember you now, indeed remembers nothing of his mortal time. It is the nature of Faerie. This I cannot change, even if I wanted to. It is a law older than mankind, older even than myself. Remain here, eat the fruit of the vines, drink the waters, and breathe the sweet air. It will give you long life, health, and bliss. But the price is your world. You must forget the world of man and all you have done within it."

"So even if you gave me Tom now—?"

"Neither he nor you have supped or drank, nor have you breathed the perfumed Lethe for long. He would not know you now, but if he returned to man's world, he would regain his memory."

Janie wrapped her arms around her shoulders and rocked back

and forth. "You are cruel, Queen of Faerie."

"My mercy has oft been deemed worse than my tortures. Make your choice, storyteller's wife."

"I—I don't know what to do. How can I take this away from him? But our memories are who we are. Please. I need more time."

Nicnivin nodded. "May no one accuse me of injustice. I give you one hour." She beckoned, and Hobs jumped up and scampered to her. "This one who has pledged himself to you will be your timekeeper. Until then, I and my court take our leave of you."

The Queen stood and spread her arms. A heavy fog swirled up, so dark and thick Janie could feel it brush clammy fingers against her skin. She blinked, and it poured away taking the Queen, her throne, and all the assembled fairies with it. Except for Hobs.

Janie reached out and stroked her hand through the cowering fairy's fur. "I'm sorry you're in so much trouble, Hobs."

Hobs curled himself into a tight ball. "We are all unfortunate players in this theater."

"I don't know what to do. For you, for me, or for Tom."

Hobs poked his nose out from the arm he had buried it under. "What does your heart tell you?"

Janie rubbed her eyes. "That's the problem. My heart's telling me all my choices stink."

"Aye."

Janie covered her face with her hands. "How can I force Tom to return to all that pain? Would he really want me to?"

"It would be better for Faerie if you did not."

Janie closed her eyes. Tom's touch, the smell of his skin—Ivory soap, hazelnut coffee, and faintly, the artificial melon and lemon fragrance of the shampoo he liked—gone forever. It would be like losing him twice today, the same as if he'd died twice.

She knew how much he hated his weakness and dependency on her. He had refused to concede to the sickness, hurting himself more no matter how much she nagged and railed at him to let her help him. Tom was so stubborn. He had conceded nothing until his body betrayed him and he had been forced to accept the wheelchair.

On that day she bought one of those silly toy scooters. She'd coaxed him to race—her on the scooter, him in his wheelchair—up and down their street. The sounds of their laughter brought scandalized frowns to the faces of their neighbors. She hadn't cared. The look of exhilaration on Tom's face had been wonderful.

But the pain got worse and the doctors prescribed more medicines. These ones made him sick and groggy. The races stopped.

They spent more time locked away in their house. He told her stories. It was enough for her. But the pain in his beautiful blue eyes, and the confused, lost look he wore when he thought she wasn't looking—

"Hobs?"

"Forty minutes."

"Thanks. But I wanted to ask, you brought my husband's stories to Faerie? How?"

"Wise Nicnivin sent we smaller fey out of Faerie to seek a storyteller. High and low we searched, but the trade of storytelling has fallen out of favor in the world of man. We despaired until I found your Tom."

"But there are thousands of authors and scriptwriters in America alone. Movies, television shows, radio plays, even. There are plenty of stories in the world."

"Technological gadgets and words scribbled on paper?" Hobs snorted. "What use are such fripperies in Faerie? Stories must be bequeathed from a storyteller's lips."

"Oh. How did you bring Tom's stories to Faerie, then?"

Hobs clapped his hands together and when he parted them, he held a shining globe like a solid soap bubble. "I crafted dream catchers to trap his tales and voice. They can divine a true storyteller's talent from dross. I rejoiced when it filled, and so sped with all haste to present it to my Queen. Oh, the beauty when she released it for all to hear! The dying roses that guard the court revived, blooming red and white and black, and the air itself grew flavored with the music of his voice."

Janie smiled. "His stories have that effect on me too. Which one was it?"

"It was a tale of an intriguing race of not-men who wore curious masks whose souls were empty but for these expressive guises. Their brain cups filled as they donned them, but were otherwise vacant. There was a killing and an inquiry."

"A murder mystery. I remember that one. It was one of my favorites." How could she leave Tom here? It had nearly destroyed her when she thought he was dead. But she didn't want to forget him either. Tom and his stories, the way he laughed, the way he always forgot to lock the doors at night, terrifying her that some derelict or robber would take advantage of his trust. She treasured every memory, every second she had of him.

Janie pressed her palms against her forehead. "Tom gave me a story when he proposed, you know. He knew I didn't like diamonds—we couldn't afford a ring anyway—so he gave me a story as an engagement present."

"A princely gift. May I be so privileged to hear what it was about?"

anie smiled. "True love, of course. There was a wedding in it, a wealthy lord and his beautiful lady. She died tragically during the wedding. A necromancer—that's a sorcerer of death—happened to be at the ceremony. He captured her spirit before it flew to the Underworld and gave it to the lord so he could still be with his bride. The lord and lady couldn't touch and could only speak to each other for one minute each day at midnight. But they were together. The spell was expensive, though. It needed to be renewed every day with gemstones, silver, and blood. The lord was rich, but over time, he had to sell everything he had until he was starving and penniless. Then there was only her and him. He fed his lifeblood to her spell so they could have one last minute together before he died. The spell faded away and they went to the Underworld together."

"A sad tale," Hobs said.

"No, don't you see? It's a happy story. It's a terrible life for them, but they get to be together, so it's okay." Janie clapped her hands over her mouth. "Oh."

"Are you unwell?"

"Time, Hobs," she whispered.

"Thirty minutes."

"I know what to do. Quick, call Nicnivin back before I change my mind."

The Queen of Air and Darkness appeared. "I am here." There was no mist, no fog, no smoke. It was as though she wasn't there, and then she was.

"You have decided?" she said.

Janie met the Queen's eyes, anguished. "Yes, I have. Queen Nicnivin, I ask you to give my Tom back. He belongs in the real world with me."

The Queen's lips curled back to bare her sharp, white teeth. "You would selfishly condemn him to his suffering?"

"It's what he wants."

"You are certain? Be very sure. You will not be able to undo your choice."

Janie lifted her chin. "I'm sure. Love isn't a fairy tale or a pretty story; it's real, and hard, and painful. But it's also wonderful. I know what Tom wants because he taught me what love means."

Nicnivin pursed her lips. "You doom Faerie with your love."

"Can't you send Hobs with his dream catchers to us? He could bring them back to you. It would buy you a little more time to find another storyteller—one that isn't sick, and one that maybe wouldn't mind staying in Faerie."

"You would do this for us? Give us your Thomas's stories

Continued on page 90

the Good, the Bad and the Beautiful

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SOMETIMES THE MEMBRANE BETWEEN THIS WORLD AND
THE NEXT IS IMPENETRABLE. SOMETIMES IT IS ALL TOO THIN

DELIVERANCE

July

get it quite right.

n anything my skin.

To me, she smelled of smoke

ing at all in west Berlin to support himself a month, especially on such short notice.

I suppose he would have stopped there, a small tag on the left earpiece.

in death, to her great annoyance.

little prompting.

she kept one hand in pl

BY JAN E. JONES ■ ILLUSTRATION BY PATRICK HARBRON

I should have been happy I should have been grateful for whatever miracle had given us this chance Claire was ecstatic I could almost hear her humming, the way she always did when life gifted her with something wonderful

Instead, it was like her fingers had pressed into my chest and clenched my heart

"You're pregnant."

She pulled the stethoscope free and folded her hands in her lap. "That's right."

"You tricked me." It was nearly two months ago.

She rolled her eyes. "Terry, I wasn't sure we could make love, let alone..." She gestured at her stomach

It had been Claire's idea. She couldn't help me undress, but once I was naked, she had guided me to the bed and straddled my body. It was like making love to a February breeze Twice my control slipped, and I thrust too hard, tearing her skin. It felt like I had plunged my penis into the snow But after close to an hour, we had climaxed together

"That's impossible," I signed, knowing it was a stupid thing to say

"Impossible,' says the man who seduced a ghost."

"Wait a minute Who seduced who?"

We had talked about children, but those dreams died the day our house burned to the ground with Claire still inside. The day I killed her

Claire looked away, and I knew my lack of response was hurting her I tried to force a smile, but it wouldn't come Claire's presence was a miracle, an oversight on God's part Our life together was as fragile as Claire herself, and any change was a risk.

What would happen as the child grew? Could Claire even carry a child long enough for it to be born healthy? And what would it do to her?

August

We celebrated the third anniversary of Claire's death two days late, but that was the day Jennifer could join us

I spent the afternoon baking a sour cream spice cake, Claire's favorite. Even though she couldn't partake, it was still her party. I even gave in and made her dinner of choice macaroni and cheese with hot dog bits. I drew the line at adding a pinch of grape Kool-Aid powder Claire said it added zest I said it elevated a mundane meal into something truly repulsive

I ate in silence while Claire talked to her sister. Jennifer didn't address me at all until I brought out the cake By then, she had downed two glasses of wine, relaxing her enough to speak to me.

"Jesus, Terry. Another damned tombstone cake?"

"Blame your sister She insists on the theme." I signed as I spoke, trying to remind Jennifer to do the same

Claire's eyes twinkled. "I wanted him to make that cherry flambé thing he used to do, but he said it would be tactless, even for me."

Her laughter was soundless, but I could hear her in my memory, even after three years of silence

By the time I had arrived home that day, the house was a blackened skeleton in a swamp of ash and glowing embers. The lawn was gray mud, a mix of ash and water from the fire trucks.

One of the firemen grabbed my arm.

"What happened?" I asked.

"It's hard to say."

In those four words, I knew. His voice was gentle, like he was talking to a child. His hands on my arms steadied me even as he guided me away from the wreckage His eyes, red-veined and shockingly bright amid a smoke-stained face, never left mine

Jennifer spotted me before I could absorb what had happened. "Terry?"

Seconds later, she had shoved the fireman aside, and we were crying together—the last time she accepted me as family

"I should have been there," Jennifer said. "She called me over to model for a painting. I would have been here sooner, but I got into a fight with my boyfriend, and by the time I got away . ..

I said nothing Crises usually brought out my best. Time and again, I had set my own feelings aside to support clients and friends alike during an emergency.

Not this time My entire body was numb I felt like a voyeur, watching a scene that had nothing to do with me personally

I heard my voice ask, "Where did it start?"

Jennifer hadn't known, but the firemen did. The fire started because the electrical outlets were wired incorrectly. Aluminum and copper wiring spliced together had melted through the insulation and started the fire in the kitchen.

I put those outlets in the month before, after seeing the electrician's estimate

I had killed my wife to save a hundred and twenty bucks

A soft poke from Claire pulled me back to the present. She pointed at her sister.

Jennifer looked different than she had three years ago Her hair was shorter, dyed a shiny black She had gained weight, and she wore more makeup these days. "What's up with the flower?" she asked

BY THE TIME I HAD ARRIVED HOME THAT DAY, THE HOUSE WAS A BLACKENED SKELETON IN A SWAMP OF ASH AND GLOWING EMBERS.

A frosted rosebud stood at the base of the gravestone cake I had worked for half an hour with a cake decorating set, creating the bud so it would be recognizable even with only a sliver of red showing The leaves were small and fragile, but the flower itself looked ready to bloom

"It's symbolic," I said.

"Of what?

Claire smiled. Despite my worry, I found myself grinning as well. For an instant, we were family again the joyous couple sharing the good news with their sister. With one hand on her belly, Claire signed, "We're going to have a—"

Jennifer sliced a hand through the air, cutting her off as she figured it out Hands shaking, she fingerspelled, "Bullshit."

"I didn't believe it either," I said. "But—"

"She's dead," Jennifer yelled. Her hands were still. "Don't you understand that?"

Claire looked at me to translate Her forehead was wrinkled from worry, but she couldn't understand Jennifer's words.

"I know she's dead," I said aloud, trying to ignore Claire's stare. "Claire says her ... body .. is creating a membrane around the baby. A kind of womb." Jennifer said nothing, and I slammed my hands against the table. "I don't get it either, ok? All I know is it's real."

Claire's hands began to move. "It's going to be ok."

"You don't know that," Jennifer snapped, echoing my own thoughts. "You're not even *real* anymore!"

Claire poked Jennifer's nose "Real enough."

On another day, she might have been able to cheer Jennifer out of her tantrum, but not today.

"You're insane," she said, still speaking to me alone "The only reason she's still here is 'cause you won't let her go. My sister is dead."

My voice slipped into a soothing tone. "I know you're upset Why don't we talk about it later, when we're all calmer?"

"Get the hell away from me." She backed toward the door. "Don't try your counselor bullshit with me."

Nobody spoke until she reached the door

"My sister is gone, Terry," she said "Why won't you let her go?"

She disappeared, slamming the door so hard the cabinets rattled.

Claire shook her head and glanced at the bottle of wine on the table "It's nights like this I wish I could still get wasted "

I got drunk enough for both of us

September

The start of the school year was always a busy time I loved it and I hated it. My agency had a contract with the local school district, and we got a lot of referrals from overworked school psychologists and overwhelmed parents I hauled at least a dozen files home every night to catch up on paperwork

I had been at it for an hour when I stopped to stretch and see what Claire was up to. I found her on the floor in the living room, curled into a ball and shivering

"What happened?" My fingers brushed her wrist

Her skin shrank and wrinkled like fruit rotting at high speed Her flesh turned white, and a spot the size of my hand collapsed inward, causing her arm to bend at an unnatural angle I yelled and pulled away

Her eyes were squeezed shut, and her good hand tightened into a fist

"What is it?" I asked, but it was useless. She couldn't hear me. She couldn't see me. "Claire, please…"

I took two steps toward the phone before stopping. Who could I call?

I returned to her side Knowing what my touch had done, I fought the urge to reach for her. Her eyes were open now, but blank. I tried anyway, signing, "What can I do?"

Could this seizure harm our baby? I knew too well the kind of damage that could be transmitted from mother to child. Drugs, alcohol, disease … a list of patient names scrolled through my mind What could happen to a child whose mother wasn't even alive?

Eventually Claire blinked, and her eyes focused She grabbed her twisted wrist and held it, pressing her thumb against the skin until it smoothed out and regained its color

"Claire?" I signed. "Can you see me?"

Ever so slightly, she moved her fist up and down. "Yes "

"Are you ok?"

She cocked her head. "Do I *look* okay?"

"What happened?"

"It moved " She grabbed the couch and pulled herself up "I got up to tell you, and my legs wouldn't hold me."

Claire stared at her wrist "I don't know what would have happened if you hadn't pulled me back."

I barely heard her Our child had moved. A part of me wanted to scream with joy. Our baby was alive Alive and healthy

And it had nearly destroyed my wife Three and a half months along, and it had done this to Claire.

What would happen as it grew?

October

Jennifer was visiting the next time it happened. No matter how much she hated me, she always came back She missed Claire as much as I did

Claire's attack was actually shorter this time

"I think it helped that Jennifer was here," she said afterward. Her skin was glassy, and her eyelids fluttered with fatigue "It's like I'm swimming. I can feel the tide pulling me, and I have to fight to stay. When you and Jennifer are here, it gives me a rope to follow "

"Like an anchor," Jennifer said When Claire nodded, she added, "So we're not saving you. We're *drowning* you Stopping you from floating to someplace better "

Claire's hands sliced the air like knives as she signed her response "You don't know that."

"I know this doesn't feel right," Jennifer said. "I know that thing inside you is unnatural."

"Unnatural? It's a *baby* " Claire touched her sister's hand. "Why can't you understand?"

I waved a hand to get her attention "Because we're worried Look at yourself "

She still hadn't gotten off the floor Her skin had smoothed and filled in where Jennifer's touch had collapsed it, but her body slumped as though gravity were too strong a force to fight

She rolled her eyes "Find me a pregnant woman who doesn't look tired "

Jennifer stood, bending at the waist so she towered over Claire "You're not pregnant You're not even a woman. You're *dead*."

"Leave her alone," I said, speaking aloud

"Don't you start too," she snapped "You're as bad as she is "

I pinched my arm. It's a technique I use when I start to lose my temper. A quick pinch, a second of pain to distract myself Negative reinforcement can work wonders. When I finally spoke, I sounded almost calm

"I know this is frightening," I said. "You're scared. So am I Don't take it out on her "

Her eyes watered. "You're killing her all over again "

Before I could recover enough to speak, she was gone

November

Jennifer continued to visit. She helped me rescue Claire's things from storage and bring them back to the apartment. We had lost most of our belongings in the fire, but a few had survived We turned the living room into a shrine filling it with those items that might help keep Claire with us.

It was Jennifer's anchor analogy that gave me the idea. The more we could surround Claire with memories of her life, the stronger the anchor At least, that was my hope

Jennifer never said a word I could see the betrayal on her face as she helped us carry boxes upstairs. Not only had I refused to let her sister go, I had asked Jennifer to help me keep her here … and she hadn't said no Painful as it was to see her sister like this, she was no more ready to let go than I was.

Old videos filled our shelves. Claire had always liked anime, so I left Japanese cartoons playing in the VCR. I ordered subtitled tapes off the Internet so she would be able to follow the dialogue Jennifer tucked a few stuffed animals into the corner of the sofa a white teddy bear with a serious case of mange and a blue thing that might have been a Muppet many years ago.

I framed and hung one of Claire's oil paintings I had spent several hundred dollars to restore it after the fire, but never found the courage to hang it. Claire had painted it after our honeymoon It was a small painting of Niagara Falls, with a faint rainbow arching through the mist. The falls were done so realistically they could have been a photograph, except that Claire, typical of her sense of humor, had then painted an oversized barrel going over the falls On the side of the barrel was the date of our wedding and the words, *Here goes nothing!*

Claire sensed the difference immediately. "This helps," she said as I straightened the painting. "This feels … *right*."

She looked more like herself, too. She walked around the room like a dancer moving to music nobody else could hear.

"How is … ?" Jennifer pointed to Claire's stomach, which had begun to bulge over the past few weeks.

Claire smiled and touched her stomach "I can feel her "

"Her?" I asked

Her smile grew. "Trust me. She's bouncing like a little gymnast."

I reached for her, hesitated I had barely touched Claire since the first attack. I could still remember the feel of her skin as it crinkled and shrank

She slid her fingers between mine and guided my hand to her body. Her skin was stronger at her waist, firm like a water bottle Unlike her hands, her stomach was nearly as warm as my own body.

"She's sleeping," Claire said. She slid her free hand into her side, and I could feel a soft nudge as she touched our child

I couldn't sign one-handed, so I mouthed, "Should you do that?"

She answered the same way. "It's ok." She leaned forward to kiss my cheek

Then I felt it. Her. Our child, shoving and turning as she protested the interruption of her nap

Claire waved for Jennifer to join us, but she refused

"I ... I can't, I'm sorry." She ran her hands through her hair, leaving black spikes. "What does it eat? How does that work?"

Claire pulled her hands free to explain

"She takes her food from me. I don't know exactly what my cells are made of, or if I even have a cellular structure. I'd love to put myself under a microscope someday. But whatever it is, it's enough to sustain her. She takes her nourishment from me, and I take it from here." She opened her arms. "From this place. From you two. Which works out pretty well. I don't even have any strange cravings."

She grinned at me. "My mother used to tell us that when she was pregnant, there were weeks where she ate nothing but pretzels and mint chocolate-chip ice cream."

That grin almost kept me from understanding what she was really saying. Our baby, with no true nourishment, was consuming Claire instead

December

December 12th was the day I first hated the baby

It would have made more sense to hate Jennifer. She was the one who called me at work at nine-thirty that morning.

"I'm sorry, Terry. There's no way I can make it. Some jackass sideswiped me on the highway this morning. The car's totaled."

Foam stress balls, grip exercisers, and other tension-relieving toys covered my desk, but I was too angry to use them

"Can't you take a cab?" I asked. "I'll pay for it."

"I'm fine, thanks for asking."

"You promised to stay with her today. Is a few hours each morning so much to ask?"

"Fuck you," she said calmly. "You think I wrecked my car to piss you off?"

Alienating Jennifer wouldn't help Claire. I stared out the window, trying to relax. The snow outside fell in clumps, hiding the clouds with a gray pattern like static

Jennifer lived twenty minutes outside of West Bay. She worked nights at a grocery store, and she couldn't afford an apartment in town. "I can be there in a half hour to pick you up," I said. I would have to reschedule two appointments, or else hand them over to somebody else.

"Don't bother. The police aren't even here yet. I'm sorry, but I can't do this today. You'll have to take care of her."

I picked at the torn plastic of my chair's armrest. "I spend sixteen hours a day with her. I've used all my time off, and Doctor Castellon already chewed me out for being late so often. I have to work."

"Well, I have to take care of this." She hung up before I could answer

It was nine forty-five. Claire had been alone nearly two hours. I stared at the calendar on the wall. For confidentiality, I wrote appointment times without names, using different colors so I could tell which clients I was seeing on any particular day

I talked Doctor Amin into taking my ten-thirty kid by making up a story about my mother having a stroke, but she couldn't cover my noon appointment. Nor could anyone else. I wound up calling the client and leaving a vague message about a family emergency, and could we reschedule for next week?

All in all, it was nearly an hour from the time Jennifer called before I was hurrying down the narrow staircase that led to the parking lot

It wasn't fast enough. When I got home, Claire was curled in the corner of the living room, eyes blank as she shivered and rocked

"I got here as fast as I could." She couldn't see me, couldn't hear the words, but I wasn't talking to her anymore. "You couldn't let her go a few hours, could you?"

When I was a child, I had gone with my parents the night the vet euthanized our German Shepherd. The parasites in his belly had multiplied too quickly, and he had wasted away to nothing in a matter of weeks

As I imagined the half-formed child inside my wife, I imagined a parasite. A pink worm, curled into a spiral as it devoured Claire from within

My fingers brushed her belly. She contracted more tightly as the contact caused her skin to shrink and wrinkle

Claire was fragile, her skin no stronger than a spider web. It would be so easy to reach inside and wrench the child out

She would never forgive me. She wanted this child.

I wanted my wife back.

"I'm right here, love," I signed. I tapped my foot against the floor. Maybe she would sense the vibrations. "I'm here. You're ok now. I'm here."

She recovered an hour later. By that time, Doctor Castellon had called to let me know I should come in the next day to clean out my office

January

Claire wanted to celebrate the New Year on the porch. "I want to feel the wind."

I bundled into four layers, including scarf and hat. I left the gloves inside so we could communicate. Claire, on the other hand, wore a short-sleeved white shirt with a denim skirt, an outfit that flattered her hips and legs. She could change outfits at will, but she was limited to things she had worn in life.

"Must be nice," I signed, "not having to worry about the cold."

"I could help you stay warm," she said. Suddenly she was naked. Her arms slipped around my neck as she scooted into my lap. It was cold enough that I could barely feel her fingers against my cheek, but the sight of her was enough to make my body respond.

She didn't look seven months pregnant. If anything, she seemed emaciated. Her body had slimmed, her breasts had shrunk, and her hips were narrower than I had ever seen. I had the urge to cook an Italian dinner, full of carbs, so she would flesh out once more.

She tossed her head and flipped her hair back. Freeing her arms, she signed, "Do you realize we've only made love once in the past three years?"

I frowned. "It's a bit chilly. I don't think the snow would do much for my performance."

Her finger poked my nose. "Wimp."

Icicles from the balcony above ours surrounded us in a half-curtain of ice. I could hear cars driving in the distance. Wind sucked the moisture from my lips, leaving them chapped and cracked.

But Claire wanted to be outside. She wanted to feel alive. I gave her a quick, soft kiss.

"You're scared you'll hurt me," she said.

I glanced at her stomach.

"We're doing fine. Both of us."

"You were comatose for two hours yesterday," I said. "That thing is killing you."

She drew away. "That thing is your daughter. *Our* daughter."

"Tell me you'll get through this." I stood and paced the length of the porch. "Promise me it won't kill you."

"No problem. I'm already dead." She forced an impish grin that slowly faded. "Terry, no mother can make that promise."

Claire had the same translucent sparkle as the icicles. She had never looked entirely *real*, but it was more noticeable these days. Her red hair appeared silver around the edges, depending on the light. Only her midsection was solid.

"I'm running out of money," I said out of nowhere

"We'll figure something out."

"Even if nothing else goes wrong, how are we supposed to do this? What's going to happen when the kid starts telling her friends that mommy's a ghost? I can't raise a kid and work at the same time, and you can't do either one."

Her head drooped until her hair covered her face. Claire only hid like that when she was hurt. "I can still be her mother."

I had been taught to hone my voice as a tool, and I could turn the harshest truths to velvet softness, but I didn't know how to make ASL gentle.

"You can't change a diaper. You can't make a bottle. You can't rock her to sleep or carry her when she's restless. You can't even hear when she wakes up at two in the morning, crying. I've worked with parents. I know what we're getting into. You can't do it, Claire."

She flipped her hair back and glared. "Maybe you're right. But I'm doing a hell of a lot right now. Maybe once she's born, it *should* be your turn."

I whispered my answer without moving my lips. "Maybe you should have asked me before you decided to have this child."

She didn't notice. "You always worry about everything."

The wind picked up, sending icy fingers across my face and up my pantslegs.

"I'm afraid," I signed. "I worry."

"Everything's going to be fine."

I smiled and pretended to believe her.

February

Unemployment payments helped, but those checks only went so far, and my checking account soon dropped into the double-digits. I thought about a day job, but I couldn't leave the house. I even grew desperate enough to call the number on one of those "Make $1,500/month from home" signs I saw stapled to a telephone pole, but it was only a scam.

It was Jennifer who came up with a temporary solution. She knew a car dealer, an ex-boyfriend, who would give me a decent price on my relatively new Honda Accord. After an hour of haggling, with Jennifer using every trick in the book to manipulate, seduce, and blackmail the poor fellow into a better bargain, we left the dealership with an '84 Chevy pickup and a check for two thousand dollars. It would get us through the next month or two.

I let Jennifer drive. I was exhausted, and my back was a snarl of knotted cords. Sleeping on the couch was never comfortable, and last night had been worse than most. Claire didn't sleep, but she sat on the arm of the couch to be close to me. In my dreams, I had reached for her, and she had shattered into a million sparks at my touch.

"You've got one chance," Jennifer said.

"What's that?" I yawned and rubbed my face.

"Take the baby now."

I blinked.

She turned left, taking us along the shore of Lake Michigan rather than back to the apartment. "You know that thing is destroying her."

I stared at the waves. Even in mid-winter, the lake was too deep and powerful to stay frozen.

"Claire won't last much longer. If you get the baby out now, it might even survive on its own."

"Claire is strong. She—"

"Have you thought about what will happen if she dies? You could lose both of them."

"The baby isn't big enough yet. I can't—"

"You son of a bitch." She pulled into a sand-covered lot and slammed on the brakes. The truck squealed to a halt. My seatbelt slammed me back against the seat.

"You're just going to sit back and watch her die?"

"Isn't that what you wanted? You keep telling me she's already dead."

She shoved me so hard my head bounced against the window. "Not like this. I watched her die once. I saw the flames coming out of the windows. I saw the smoke, and I knew she was still inside."

I grabbed her hand and held it, wishing there was a way to make her understand.

"You're making me watch it all over again, you bastard."

I lost it. "I didn't ask for this either, dammit!" I knocked her hands away, unbuckled the seatbelt, and stumbled out of the truck. I heard her follow. "Claire doesn't get it," I said. "She doesn't realize this is killing her. Or maybe she doesn't care. She's stronger than I am."

"But what do you want me to do? Don't you understand that taking her baby will kill her too? Haven't you seen the way she talks about it? I wish it had never happened. I wish I had never *met* your sister. Maybe she'd still be alive. But I can't change what happened, and I can't take away the one thing that makes her happy."

"She's dead, Terry!" It was still cold enough that the beaches were mostly barren, and the restaurants hadn't opened their patios. Even so, her shouting drew a few stares. "It wouldn't hurt her. If we work together, we can save her. She *beats*. You could take the baby, and she would recover. You could get it to the hospital."

Physically, I could do it. Tear through the skin of her belly and rip out the baby. Hadn't I thought about it a hundred times before?

HER RED HAIR APPEARED SILVER AROUND THE EDGES, DEPENDING ON THE LIGHT. ONLY HER MIDSECTION WAS SOLID.

Premature babies still had a chance of survival....

Sure they did. In a hospital, with nurses and doctors watching their every move.

Fathers were supposed to be willing to give their lives for their children. But could I sacrifice my wife?

Could I sacrifice our unborn child to save her? "Claire would never forgive me."

"You think she'll thank you for letting her die again?" She grabbed my sleeve. Tears dripped onto the front of her jacket. "Please, Terry."

I thought about the feel of her skin, the rubbery toughness of her stomach ... the rest fragile like tissue paper. I remembered my hand on Claire's belly, feeling the pokes and prods of our daughter responding to her mother's touch.

Slowly, I nodded.

We drove back in silence. When we reached the apartment, I stopped with my key in the lock. "Could I have a few minutes alone with her?" I couldn't look at her. "I don't expect she'll want me around, after."

Jennifer kissed me on the cheek. "I'll wait here."

I stepped inside and closed the door, then twisted the deadbolt into place, locking her out.

Jennifer didn't have a key to the apartment.

I sat with my back against the door and wept as Jennifer began to yell.

March

It was raining outside, a hard, gray rain with clouds that turned day to night.

Claire and I had spent one of our first dates in rain like this. We wound up dancing in the sand, both drenched as we swayed to music nobody else could hear. We fell together and learned that

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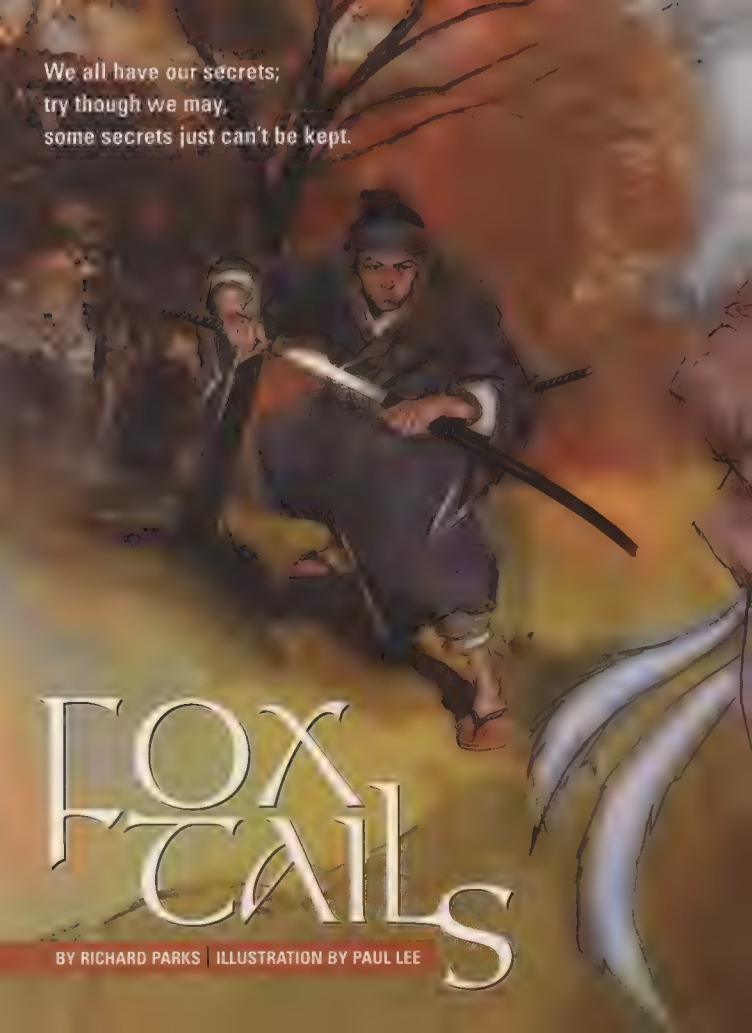
We all have our secrets;
try though we may,
some secrets just can't be kept.
FOX
TAILS
BY RICHARD PARKS | ILLUSTRATION BY PAUL LEE

I WAS JUST OUTSIDE OF KYOTO, CLOSE ON THE [illegible] timing could be somewhat lacking.

[illegible]

"A silver fox with two tails? Sometimes appears as a human female named Kuzunano?"

The lantern suddenly had my full attention. "I'm listening."

[illegible]

"How do I know you're telling me the truth?"

[illegible] out him knowing it.

[illegible] exchange?"

[illegible] the temple of your choice."

[illegible] start on your account."

I knew it would all come down to just [illegible] was staining the lantern's paper. The thing [illegible] but gave in.

"Very well, but do it properly."

"Always," I said. "Now tell me where I can find Lady Kuzunoha."

The ghost knew I was good for it. Information was the lifeblood of any nobleman's proxy, and only a fool would cheat an informant once a deal was agreed. I wasn't a fool ... most of the time.

"Lady Kuzunoha is in Shinoda Forest."

I sighed deeply. "I don't appreciate you wasting my time, *ren*. My patron already had the place searched! She's not there."

"If the idiot hadn't sent his army he might have found her. She had more of a romantic rendezvous in mind, no? If you're really looking for her, that's where she is. Go there yourself if you don't believe me."

"All right, but remember—I may not be intimate with temples but I do have contacts. If you're lying to me, I'll come back with a tinderbox and a priest who specializes. Do you understand me?"

"She's there, I tell you. Now honor our bargain."

I reached inside my robe and pulled out a bag of uncooked rice already measured out. I took a pair of wooden chopsticks and showed them point first through the opening of the bag and held the offering in the palms of my hands before the lantern.

"For the good of my friend ... uh, what's your name?"

"Seita."

"Seita-san."

The bag floated out of my hands and shriveled like a dead leaf in a winter's wind. In a moment the pitiful remnants of the offering drifted to the ground in front of the bridge and the lantern let out a deep sigh of contentment.

Quality stuff," it said. "I hope we can do business again."

"Maybe, if your story proves true and Lady Kuzunoha doesn't send any more *youkai* after me."

"But Lady Kuzunoha didn't ... ahh, please forget I said that." For a moment I thought the lantern was just looking for another offering, but that wasn't it. The thing was actually scared, and there aren't many things short of an exorcist that will scare a ghost.

"If she didn't send it, who did?"

Just before it winked out like a snuffed candle, the lantern whispered, "Yamada-san, there isn't that much rice in Kyoto."

The servant who had come to my home the day before claimed to be from Lord Abe no Yasuna. At first I didn't believe him, but I wasn't so prosperous that I could chance turning down work. I also couldn't risk the potential insult to Lord Abe if the servant was telling the truth, even the Emperor would think twice before courting the Abe family's displeasure.

Like most members of the Court, the Abe family's ancestral lands were elsewhere, but they kept a palatial residence within the city to be close to the seat of power. Courtiers and supplicants waited two deep within the walled courtyard, but the servant ushered me right through. I didn't miss the raised eyebrows and muttering that followed in our wake. It didn't bother me. I was used to it.

Technically I was of noble birth since the minor lording who was my father lowered himself to acknowledge me. Yet I had no inheritance, no regular patron, and no political connections, so the main difference between someone such as myself and your typical peasant farmer was that the farmer knew where his next meal was coming from. Yet, if it hadn't been for that accident of birth, people like Abe no Yasuna wouldn't deal with me in the first place, so I guess I should count my blessings. One of these days I'll get around to it.

I was ushered in to the Abe family reception hall. "Throne room" would have been a better description, and not too far from the truth. The Abe family counted more than a few actual royalty in their family tree, including the occasional emperor. The man himself was there, waiting for me. He was tall and imposing, probably no more than forty. Handsome. I would say. There was a peppering of gray in his black hair, but no more than that. He seemed distracted. Kneeling at a discreet distance was an older lady. At first glance I assumed she was a servant, but then I got a better look at her *kamono*, not to mention her face, and saw the family resemblance. It was unusual for a noblewoman to greet male guests save behind a screen, but perhaps the circumstances were unusual. I suspected they might be.

I bowed low. "You sent for me, lord?"

He studied me intently for several seconds before speaking. "Yamada no Goji. Your reputation for effectiveness ... and discretion, precedes you. I trust it is deserved."

It was all I could do to keep from smiling. A delicate matter Good—delicate matters paid the best. "I am at my lord's service."

Lord Abe turned to the kneeling woman. "Mother, I need to speak with Yamada-san alone. Boring business."

"Family business," said the old woman dryly as she rose, "but do as you will. It seems you must. these days."

Mother Now I understood. I had heard of Abe no Akiko by reputation, as had nearly everyone in Kyoto. She had been a famous beauty in her day and, judging from what I could see of her now, that day was not long past. She also had a reputation for being a fierce advocate of her family's position at court and was rumored to have put more than one rival out of the game permanently. Still, that wasn't an unusual rumor for any courtier who'd lasted more than a few seasons. More to the point, she wasn't the one who had summoned me.

Lord Abe was silent for a few moments, either collecting his thoughts or making sure his mother was out of earshot; I couldn't tell which.

"Have you ever been married, Yamada-san?" he said finally.

"I have not, lord."

"I was, for a while, to a lovely woman named Kuzunoha. I rather enjoyed it, but love and happiness are illusions, as the scriptures say."

I was beginning to get the drift. "Pardon my impertinence, but when did she leave?"

Lord Abe looked grim. "Two days ago."

"And you wish for me to find her?"

Lord Abe hesitated. "The matter is a bit more complicated than that, as I'm sure you've already guessed. Please follow me."

Despite Lord Abe's confidence I hadn't guessed much about the situation at all, beyond the obvious. Wives left husbands for numerous reasons, and vice versa, and this wouldn't be the first time I'd been sent after one or the other. Lord Abe's position was such that he had apparently been able to keep the matter quiet; I'd certainly heard nothing of it. Still, the situation was unfortunate but not a real scandal. I followed as Lord Abe led through a small partition leading to a tiny room behind the dais where Lord Abe had received me. We came to a another screen that opened onto another courtyard, and beyond that was the roofed wall that surrounded the entire residence complex. There was another gate visible.

Lord Abe stopped at the screen. It took me a few seconds to realize that he wasn't looking beyond it but *at* it. Someone had written a message on the *shoji* screen in flowing script. It was a poem of farewell, but, despite its obvious beauty, that was not what got my attention. It was Lady Kuzunoha's confession, clearly stated, that she was not a woman at all but a fox spirit he had once rescued on the grounds of the Inari Shrine and that she could no longer remain with Lord Abe as his wife. The poem ended: "If you would love me again, find me in Shinoda Forest." The poem was signed "Reluctant Kuzunoha."

"My Lord, are you certain this is your wife's script?"

"Without question. She always had the most beautiful calligraphy. She could copy any text of the *sutras* exactly, but when writing as herself her own style is distinctive."

That his wife had left him was one thing. That his wife was a fox was quite another. Pretending to be a human woman was a fox spirit's favorite trick, and Lord Abe wouldn't be the first man to be

fooled by one. At the least, that could be somewhat embarrassing, and, in the rarified circles of court where favor and banishment were never separated by more than a sword's edge, "somewhat" could be enough to tip the scale.

"She knew I didn't allow servants in here, so none have seen this but my mother and myself. I will destroy the door," Lord Abe said, "for obvious reasons, but I did want you to see it first. I have already sealed the document granting you authority to act on my behalf in this matter." He pulled the scroll out of a fold of his robe and handed it to me.

I took the scroll but couldn't resist the question. "What matter, Lord Abe? Pardon my saying so, but if this confession is true, then you are well rid of her. Fox spirits are dangerous creatures."

That was an understatement if there ever was. One Chinese emperor had barely avoided being murdered by a fox masquerading as a concubine, and one poor farmer spent a hundred years watching a pair of fox-women playing Go for what he thought was an afternoon. They were tricksters at the best of times and often far worse.

"It wasn't like that," Lord Abe said quietly. "Kuzunoha loved me. I do not know what drove her to leave or to make this confession, but I was never in danger from her."

"You want me to find her, then?" I had to ask. There were at least as many fools among the nobility as elsewhere, and there was always someone who thought the rules didn't apply to him. I was more than a little relieved to discover that Lord Abe was not that stupid.

He shook his head. His expression had not changed, but his eyes were moist and glistening. "Lady Kuzunoha is correct that we cannot be together now, but she should not have asked me to give up Doshi as well."

"Doshi?"

"My son, Yamada-san. She took my son."

I was beginning to see what he meant by "complicated." "I take it you've already searched Shinoda Forest?" That was an easy supposition to make. I already knew what he'd found, otherwise I wouldn't be there.

He sighed. "I should have gone personally, but I did not trust myself to let Kuzunoha go if I ever held her again. My mother suggested we send my personal retainers and in my weakness I agreed. They searched thoroughly, and I lost two good men to an ogre in the process. There was no sign of either Kuzunoha or Doshi." He looked at me. "That is your task, Yamada-san. I want you to find my son and return him to me."

"Again I must ask your pardon, Lord, but is this wise? The boy will be half-fox himself. Isn't there a danger?"

His smile was so faint one might have missed it, but I did not. "There's always a danger, Yamada-san. If we are fortunate we get to decide which ones we choose to face. I want my son back."

"By any means required?"

"Do not harm Lady Kuzunoha. With that one exception, do what you must."

At least my goal was clear enough. I didn't for one moment think it was going to be easy.

Another advantage of being of the noble class was that it entitled you to carry weapons openly, and Shinoda Forest was not a place you wanted to go empty handed. The place had a deserved reputation for being the haunt of fox spirits and worse; most bandits even avoided the place, and any bandit who didn't was *not* the sort you wanted to meet. Yet here I was, for the princely sum of five imported Chinese bronze coins and one *kan* of uncooked rice a day, plus reasonable expenses. You can be sure I counted that payment to the red lantern ghost as "reasonable."

There was a path. Not much of one, but I stuck to it. There was a danger in keeping to the only known path in a wood full of monsters, not to mention it might make finding Lady Kuzunoha even more difficult, but I kept to the path anyway. Getting lost in Shinoda Forest would have done neither me nor my patron much good.

Even so, once you got past the fact that the woods were full of things that wanted to kill you, it was a very beautiful place. There was a hint of fall in the air; the maple leaves were beginning to shade into red, contrasting with the deep green of the rest of the wood. The scent was earthy but not unpleasant. It had been some time since I'd been out of the city and I was enjoying the scent and sounds of a true forest. Too much so, perhaps, otherwise I would never have been caught so easily.

Even so, once you got past the fact that the woods were full of things that wanted to kill you, it was a very beautiful place.

I hadn't walked three paces past a large stone when the world went black. When I woke up, I almost wished I hadn't: my head felt like two *shou* of plum wine crammed into a one *shou* cask. For a moment I honestly thought it would explode. After a little while, the pain eased enough for me to open my eyes. It was early evening, though of which day I had no idea. I was lying on my side, trussed like a deer on a carrying pole, and about ten feet from a campfire. Sitting beside that campfire were two of the biggest, most unpleasant-looking men it had ever been my misfortune to get ambushed by. They were both built like stone temple guardians, and their arms were as thick as my legs. Otherwise there wasn't much to separate them, save one was missing an ear and the other's nose had been split near the tip. One look at them and my aching brain only had room for one question.

Why am I still alive?

I must have moaned with the effort of keeping my eyes open, since one of the bandits glanced in my direction and grunted.

"He's awake. Good. I thought you'd killed him. You know an ogre likes 'em fresh."

There was my answer, though it went without saying that I didn't care for it. Maybe I could get a better one. "You two gentlemen work for an ogre?"

"Don't be stupid," said Missing Ear. "The ogre is just a bonus. Our employer wants you dead, and, since you're dead either way, we sell you to the ogre that lives in this forest. That's good business."

He clearly wasn't the brightest blade in the rack, but I couldn't fault his mercantile instincts. "So who are you working for?"

"You're dead. What do you care?"

"If I'm going to die, I'd like to know why. Besides, if I'm good as dead it's not like I'll be telling anyone."

"Well if you must know—oww!" Missing Ear began, but then Split Nose leaned over and rapped him sharply on the back of his skull.

"You know what *she* said about talking too much," he said. "What if she found out? Do you want her angry at you? I'd sooner take my chances with the ogre."

Her. At this point there didn't seem to be much question as to whom they meant.

Missing Ear rubbed his head. He had a sour look on his face, but what his companion had said to him apparently sank in. "No. That would be... bad."

"So far we've done everything like she said. The ogre will see our fire soon and come for this fool, and that's that. We can

get out of this demon-blighted place."

"You two are making a big mistake. I'm acting as proxy for Lord Abe. An insult to me is an insult to him." It wasn't much, but it was all I had. I was still surprised at the bandits' reaction. They glanced at each other and burst out laughing.

"We know why you're here, *baka*," said Split Nose when he regained his composure. "Now be a well-behaved meal and wait for the ogre."

The bandits obviously knew more about this matter than I did. It was also obvious that they had searched me before they tied me up. I could see my pack near the campfire and my *tachi* leaning against a boulder only a few feet away. It was the only decent material object I owned, a gift from the grateful father of a particularly foolish young man whose good name I was able to salvage. It was a beautiful sword, with sharkskin-covered grip and scabbard both dyed black. The *tsuba* was of black iron and the blade, I had occasion to know, was sharp enough to shave with. If only I could reach it. I could demonstrate that virtue on my captors, but it was impossible. As close as the *tachi* was, it might as well have been in Mongolia for all the good of it. Try as I might, I could not get free of the ropes. I flashed back on something Lord Abe had said.

"*Love and happiness are both illusions.*"

To which I could add that life was fleeing and illusory itself. I might not have been much for the temple, but the priests had that much right. The best I could hope for now was that the ogre was more hungry than cruel, then at least he would be quick.

There was a very faint rustling in the undergrowth. At first I thought it was the ogre coming for his supper, but then I couldn't quite imagine something that large moving so quietly. A light flared and I assumed someone had lit a torch, but the flame turned blue and then floated over the campsite and disappeared. Then, almost on cue, thirteen additional blue fires kindled in the darkness just beyond the campfire.

Yurrei . . . ? Oh, hell.

Ghosts were just like *youkai* in one important respect—there were ghosts, and then there were ghosts. Some, like the red lantern ghost Seita, were reasonable folk once you got to know them. Some, however, tended to be angry at everything living. Judging from the *onibi* and balefire I was seeing now, all three of us were pretty much stew for the same pot. Split Nose and Missing Ear knew it too. The pair of them had turned whiter than a funeral kimono, and for a moment they actually hugged each other, though Split Nose managed to compose himself enough to rap Missing Ear's skull again.

"You idiot! You made camp in a graveyard!"

"Wasn't no graveyard here!" Missing Ear protested, but Split Nose was already pointing back toward me.

"What's that, then?"

I was having some trouble moving my head, but I managed to see what they were seeing, not ten feet away on the far side of me. It was a stone grave marker, half-covered in weeds and vines, but still visible enough even in the firelight.

When I looked back at the bandits the ghost was already there, hovering about two feet off the ground. It might have been female, it was wearing a funeral white kimono but the way its kimono was tied was about as feminine as the specter got. Its mouth was three feet wide and full of sharp teeth, its eyes were as big as soup bowls and just as bulging. One of its hands was tucked within the kimono, but the other, pointing directly at the cowering bandits, bore talons as long as knives.

Its mouth was three feet wide and full of sharp teeth, its eyes were as big as soup bowls and just as bulging.

YOU HAVE DISTURBED ME. PREPARE TO DIE.

The ghost's voice boomed like thunder, and the blue fires showed traces of red.

"Mercy!" cried Split Nose. "It was a mistake!"

YES. NOW PREPARE TO ATONE!

"Mercy!" they both cried again and bowed low.

The revenant seemed to consider. BOW LOWER, DOGS.

They did so. Then came two flashes of silver, and the bandits slumped over into a heap. In an instant the balefires went out, and the ghost floated down to earth, and then she wasn't a ghost at all but a woman carrying a sword.

My sword.

I glanced at the boulder and saw that the *tachi* was missing, though its scabbard still leaned against the stone. The grave stone was gone, but by this time I expected that. Fox spirits were masters of illusion. The woman turned to face me.

I had never seen a more beautiful woman in my life. A master painter could not have rendered a face more perfect, or hair so long and glossy black that it shone like dark fire. She seemed little more than a delicate young woman, but the ease with which she handled my sword and the twitching bodies of the two bandits said otherwise. She walked over to me without a second glance at the carnage behind her.

"Lady Kuzunoha?" I made it sound like a question, but really it wasn't.

"Who are you?" she demanded.

"My name is Yamada no Goji. Lord Abe sent me."

"I've heard of you, Yamada-san. Well, then. Let's get this over with."

She raised the sword again, and I closed my eyes. I would have said a prayer if I could have thought of one. All I could manage was the obvious.

This is my death.

I heard the angry whoosh of the blade as it cut through the air. It took me several long seconds to realize that it hadn't cut through *me*. Not only was I still alive, but my hands were free. Another whoosh and my legs were free as well, though both arms and legs were too numb from the ropes to be of much use to me at first. While I struggled to get to my feet, Lady Kuzunoha calmly walked back to the bandits and took a wrapping cloth from one of their pouches which she used to methodically clean the blade. I had just managed to sit up when she returned the long sword to its scabbard and tossed it at my feet.

"I wouldn't advise staying here too long, Yamada-san," she said. "The ogre will be here soon."

"I'm afraid he's going to be disappointed," I said.

She shook her head, and she smiled. "Oh, no. Those two are still alive. We foxes know much of the nature of the spine and where to break it. They'll die soon enough, but probably not before they're eaten. The fools would have been eaten in either case, of course. Ogres don't make bargains with meat."

Her words were like cold water. If they couldn't totally negate the effect her beauty was having on me, at least they reminded me that I wasn't dealing with a human being. An important point that I had best remember. I got to my feet a little unsteadily.

"My thanks for saving me, Kuzunoha-sama," I said, "but I'm afraid that I have some business with you yet."

"So I assumed The path is about fifteen paces ahead of you. Stay on it until you reach the river. You'll be able to hear a waterfall," she said. "I'll be waiting for you there."

Lady Kuzunoha moved quickly away from me. In a moment her image shimmered, and I saw her true form, a silver fox bearing the second tail that betrayed her spirit nature. She ran swiftly and was soon out of sight. I gathered my belongings and hobbled along the way she had gone as best I could.

I wasn't clear on a lot of things, not the least of which was why Lady Kuzunoha had bothered to save my life. After all, if she knew who sent me, then she knew why I had come, and if she'd been willing to surrender the boy in the first place, she could have arranged that easily enough while Lord Abe's men searched the wood. And if she *wasn't* willing to give up the child, why not just kill me? It's not as if I could have done anything to stop her, and if I had any doubts of either her ability or will in that regard, I had the wretched bandits' example to prove otherwise.

A lot of things didn't make sense, and if I wanted any answers I'd have to go much deeper into Shinoda Forest to get them. Part of me wondered if I might be better off taking my chances with the ogre. Then I heard a large crashing noise in the forest back the way I'd come and decided not. I picked up the pace as much as the headache and my tingling limbs allowed.

I'd been careless once and was lucky to be alive. This time as I moved down the path, I had my sword out and ready. I wasn't sure how much good it would do me against what I'd likely face, but the grip felt comforting in my hand.

I came to the place Lady Kuzunoha described and followed the sound of rushing water. A cold water stream rushing down the adjacent hill formed a twelve foot waterfall into the river's rocky shallows. Lady Kuzunoha was in human form again. She stood directly underneath the rushing water, her slim fingers pressed together in an attitude of prayer, her long black hair flowing over her body like a cloak. Her hair was the only thing covering her. For a little while I forgot to breathe.

I knew Lady Kuzunoha's human form was an actual transformation and not simply illusion, else she would never have been able to bear a human child, but I also knew it was not her true form. Knowing this did not help me at all. The only thing that did was the sharp and clear memory of what she had done to those two hapless bandits; that was *my* cold waterfall. That left the question of why Lady Kuzunoha needed one.

When I finally managed to look away, I noticed Lady Kuzunoha's kimono neatly folded on top of a flat stone nearby. I'm still not sure why I turned away. Maybe it was my common sense, warning me of danger. Or maybe I had come to the reluctant—and relieved—conclusion that this little show was not being staged for my benefit. Lady Kuzunoha was preparing herself for something, but I didn't have clue one as to what that might be.

There was a small clearing nearby; I waited there. Lady Kuzunoha finally emerged, now fully dressed, her hair still wet but combed out and orderly. If anything she appeared more winsome than before. She looked sad but resolute as she approached the center of the clearing. In her sash she had tucked one of those slim daggers that high-born ladies tended to carry both as self-defense and a symbol of rank. She knelt beside me, looking away.

"I'm ready," she said. She drew the dagger and put the naked blade across her thighs.

I frowned. Maybe Seita the ghost was right about me, since what came out of my mouth then wasn't very intelligent. "I don't understand. Ready for what, Lady Kuzunoha?"

It was as if she hadn't even heard me. "I would send my love a poem but words are useless now. You may take back whatever proofs your master requires. Now stand ready to assist me."

The light dawned. The waterfall was a purification rite, which would explain the prayer but not much else. "You think I'm here to kill you!"

Lady Kuzunoha looked up at me. "Do not mock me, Yamada-san. I saved your life, and I think I'm due the courtesy of the truth. Did Lord Abe send you or not?"

"I have his writ and seal if you doubt me. But I am no assassin, whatever you may have heard of me."

Now Lady Kuzunoha looked confused. "But … what else? I cannot return. He knows that."

If Lady Kuzunoha was confused, I was doubly so, but at least I had the presence of mind to reach down and take the knife away from her. "First of all, assuming I *had* been sent to harm you, will you please explain why you're being so cooperative?"

She frowned. "Did my husband not explain the circumstances of our first meeting?"

"He didn't have to—I saw your message. You said that he rescued you from hunters … before he knew that you and the silver fox were one and the same, I mean."

"There was even more to it that he didn't know, Yamada-san. You see, I was already in love with Lord Abe, from the day his procession rode past Shinoda Forest three years ago. I came to the Inari Shrine in the first place because I knew he would be there. He already owned my heart, but from that day forward he owned my life as well. If now he requires that of me, who am I to deny my love what is his by right?"

Now it was starting to make some sense. No one had ever claimed that self-sacrifice was a fox trait, but I knew love made people do silly things, and it was clear even to a lout like me that Lady Kuzunoha, fox spirit or no, was still deeply in love with her husband. I had suspected that Lord Abe was deluding himself on that point, but now I knew better.

"If Lord Abe didn't know you were a fox, why did you leave him?"

"I didn't want to," Lady Kuzunoha said, sadly. "I tried so hard . . . You know what I am, Yamada-san. The body I wear now is real, but it is a sort of mask. Sometimes the mask slips, that's unavoidable. Yet it was happening to me more and more. In my foolishness I thought I would be spared this, but the burden of pretending to be something I am not became too much, even for his sake. It was only a matter of time before my true nature would be revealed and my husband and his family shamed. I could no longer take that risk. I am a fraud, but I was honest with my husband about why I had to leave. He did not come himself, so I assume he hates me now."

"He doesn't hate you, Lady Kuzunoha. He understands your reasons and accepts them, though he is very sad as you might imagine."

Lady Kuzunoha rose to her feet with one smooth motion. "Then why did my lord not come himself? Why did he send his warriors? Why did he send *you*?"

"My patron said he did not trust himself to let you go if he ever held you again. I can not fault him in this."

She actually blushed slightly at the compliment, but pressed on. "You didn't answer my other question."

"He sent his retainers and me for the same reason: we were looking for Doshu."

"My son? But why?"

"To bring him home, Lady. Lord Abe lost you. He didn't want to lose his son too. Maybe that's selfish of him, but I think you can understand how he feels."

"But I do *not* understand," Lady Kuzunoha said, and now the gentle, sad expression she had worn since leaving the waterfall was nowhere to be seen. She looked into my eyes and my knees shook. "Yamada-san, are you telling me that my son is missing?"

I fought the urge to back away. "But . . . you didn't take him?"

"I … ? Of course not! Doshi's blood may be mostly fox, but in Shinoda Forest that's not enough. He could never have made a home in my world! Doshi belongs with his father."

I took a deep breath. "If that's the case, then yes, Lady Kuzunoha — I'm telling you that your son is missing."

I'm not sure what I expected, but Lady Kuzunoha merely held out her hand. "Please return my dagger, Yamada-san. I promise not to use it on myself … or you."

I gave the knife back, carefully. "Do you have someone else in mind?"

Her smile was the stuff of nightmares. "That remains to be seen."

I had more questions, but Lady Kuzunoha was in no mood to answer them, and I knew better than to test my luck. She was kind enough to see me safely out of the forest before she disappeared, but it was clear she had other matters on her mind besides my well-being. I, on the other hand, could think of little else.

The bandit was right to call you a fool. You had no idea of how big a mess you were in.

The *youkai* that Setai had warned me about should have been my first clue. Still, if Lord Abe had sent me chasing wild foxfire, there still might be time to get on the right trail. I didn't like where I thought it was going to lead, but I had given my word, and that was the only thing worth more to me than my sword. I just hoped it didn't have to mean more than my life.

When I got back into Kyoto, the first thing I did was track down Kenji. It wasn't that hard. He was at one of his favorite drinking establishments near the Demon Gate. Technically it was the Northeast Gate, but, since that was the direction from which demons and evil spirits were supposed to enter, the name stuck. Naturally, someone like Kenji would keep close to such a place. He said it was good for business.

Business looked a little slow. For one thing, Kenji was drinking very cheap sak. For another, he was in great need of a barber; his head looked like three days' growth of beard. I found a cushion on the opposite side of his table and made myself comfortable. Kenji looked at me a bleari. He had one of those in between faces, neither old nor young, though I happened to know he was pushing fifty. He finally recognized me.

"Yamada-san! How is my least favorite person?"

"Terrible, you'll be pleased to know. I need a favor."

He smiled like a little drunken buddha. "Enlightenment is free but in this world all favors have a price. What do you want?"

"I need to seal the powers of a fox spirit, at least temporarily. Is this possible?"

He whistled low. "When all is illusion all things are possible. Still, you're wading in a dangerous current, Yamada-san."

"This I know. Can you help me or not?"

Kenji seemed to pause in thought and then rummaged around inside his robe, which, like him, was in need of a bath. He pulled out a slip of paper that was surprisingly clean considering from where it had come. He glanced at it, then nodded. "This will do what you want, but the effect is temporary. Just how temporary depends on the spiritual powers of the animal. Plus you'll have to place it on the fox directly."

"How many bowls?"

"Rice? For this? Yamada-san, I'll accept three good bronze, but only because it's you."

Reluctantly I counted out the coins. "Done, but this better not be one of your worthless fakes for travelers and the gullible."

He sat up a little straighter. "Direct copy from the Diamond Sutra, Yamada-san. I was even sober when I did it."

"I hope so, since if this doesn't work and somehow I survive, I'll be back to discuss it. If it does work, I owe you a drink."

He just smiled a ragged smile. "Either way, you know where to find me."

I did. Whatever Kenji's numerous faults as a priest and a man, at least he was consistent. I carefully stashed the paper seal and headed for Lord Abe's estate. I wasn't sure how much time I had left, but I didn't think there was a lot.

There was less than I knew.

Before I even reached the gate at the Abe estate, I saw a lady traveling alone. She was veiled, of course. Her wide-brimmed *boshi* was ringed with pale white mesh that hung down like a curtain, obscuring her features. I couldn't tell who it was but her bearing, her clothes, even the way she moved betrayed her as a noble. A woman of that class traveling unescorted was unusual in itself, but more unusual was the fact that no one seemed to notice. She passed a gang of rough looking workmen who didn't even give her a second glance.

Once the density of the crowd forced her to brush against a serving girl who looked startled for a moment as she looked around, then continued her errand, frowning. The woman, for her part, kept up her pace.

They can't see her.

At that point I realized it was too late to keep watch at the Abe estate. I kept to the shadows and alleyways as best I could, and I followed. I could move quietly at need and I was as careful as I could be without losing sight of her, if she spotted me, she'd know that fact long before I did. I kept with her as the buildings thinned out and she moved up the road leading out of the city.

She's going to the Inari Shrine.

Mount Inari was clearly visible in the distance, and the woman kept up her pace without flagging until she had reached the grounds of the shrine. Its numerous red *torii* were like beacons, but she took little notice of the shrine buildings themselves and immediately passed on to the path leading up to the mountain.

Hundreds of bright red gates donated by the faithful over the years arched over the pathway, giving it a rather tunnel-like appearance. I didn't dare follow directly behind her now; one backward glance would have betrayed me. I moved off the path and kept to the edge of the wood that began immediately behind the shrine buildings. It was easy now to see why hunters might frequent the area; the woods went on for miles around the mountainside. There were fox statues as well, since foxes were the messengers of the God of Rice; they were depicted here in stone with message scrolls clamped in their powerful jaws. The wooden torii themselves resembled gates, and I knew that's what they were, symbolic gates marking the transition from the world of men to the world of the spirits, and this was the true destination of my veiled Lady. I didn't want to follow her further but I knew there was no real choice now; to turn back meant failure or worse. Going on might mean the same, if I was wrong about what was about to happen.

The woman left the path where the woods parted briefly to create a small meadow. I hid behind a tree, but it was a useless gesture.

"You've followed me for quite some time, Yamada-san. Please do me the courtesy of not skulking about any longer."

I recognized the voice. Not that there was any question in my mind by then, but there was no point in further concealment. I stepped into the clearing. "Greetings, Lady Akiko."

Lady Abe no Akiko untied her veil and removed her boshi. She was showing her age just a little more in the clear light of day, though she was still very handsome. "Following me was very rude, Yamada-san. My son will hear of it."

"Perhaps there is a way we can avoid that unpleasantness, Lady, if not all unpleasantness. You're here about your grandson, aren't you?"

She covered her mouth with her fan to indicate that she was smiling. "Of course. Family matters have always been my special concern."

Someone else entered the clearing. Another woman, dressed and veiled in a manner very similar to Akiko. "You said you'd come alone," the newcomer said. It sounded like an accusation.

"It was not my doing that he is here," Lady Akiko said. "And it will make no difference. Surely you can see that."

"Perhaps." The newcomer removed her *boshi*, but her voice had already announced her. Lady Kuzunoha. She glared at me as she approached. Now she and Lady Akiko were barely a few paces apart.

"Yamada-san, this no longer concerns you," Lady Kuzunoha said. "I respectfully disagree. My responsibility ends only when Lord Abe's son is found."

Lady Akiko glared at her former daughter-in-law. "And this . . . this *rasen* who betrayed my son knows where he is! Do you deny it?"

"Of course not," Lady Kuzunoha said haughtily. "I know exactly where my son is. As do you."

Lady Akiko practically spat out the words. "Rest! With the person who took him!"

"Yes," Lady Kuzunoha said grimly. She drew her dagger. "Let us settle this!"

"Pitiful fool!"

It turned out that Lady Akiko already had her dagger unsheathed, concealed in the sleeve of her kimono. She lashed out and Lady Kuzunoha gasped in pain. She clutched her hand as her dagger fell uselessly into the grass. In a moment Akiko had Kuzunoha's arms pinned at her sides and her dagger at the young woman's throat.

"One doesn't survive so long at court without learning a few tricks. Or, for that matter, giving your enemies a sporting chance. Now prove the truth of my words, worthless vixen! Tell me before this witness where Lord Abe's son is, and do not try any of your fox tricks else I'll kill you where you stand!"

"You will not taste my blood that easily, Old Woman."

The fight was far from over. Lady Kuzunoha's power was gathering around her like a storm, the air fairly crackled with it. Lady Akiko held her ground, but the hand holding the knife was shaking, and I knew it took her a great effort to keep the blade point ed at Lady Kuzunoha's throat.

"Tell Yamada-san where Doshi is if you want to live!" Lady Akiko said. "And no lies."

"Why would he believe anything I say," Lady Kuzunoha said calmly, "if he does not believe what I have told him before now?"

I knew that, in a few seconds, anything I did would be too late. I stepped forward quickly, pulling out Kenji's seal as I did so. Both women watched me intently as I approached. "Lady Kuzunoha, do you know what this is?" She nodded, her face expressionless.

Lady Akiko wasn't expressionless at all. Her look was pure triumph. "Yamada-san, you are more resourceful than I thought. I will recommend to my son that he double your fee."

I gave her a slight bow. "I am in Lord Abe's service."

I concentrated then on Lady Kuzunoha. "If you know what this is, then you know what it can do to you. You already know where your son is?"

She looked resigned. "I do."

"That's all I need. Please prepare yourself."

Lady Kuzunoha went perfectly still in Lady Akiko's grip but before either of them could move again, I darted forward and slapped the seal on Lady Akiko's forehead.

"Yamada-*sama*!!"

My name ended in a snarl of rage, but Lady Akiko had time to do nothing else before the transformation was complete. In Lady Akiko's place was an old red fox vixen with three tails. Lady Kuzunoha stood frozen, blinking in surprise.

My first slash caught it across the chest, and it yipped in pain. My second stroke severed the fox's head from its body.

There was no more time to consider. My sword was in my hands just as the fox gathered itself to spring at Lady Kuzunoha's throat. My shout startled it, and it sprang at me instead. My first slash caught it across the chest, and it yipped in pain. My second stroke severed the fox's head from its body. The fox that had been Abe no Akiko fell in a bloody heap, twitching.

I had seen Lady Kuzunoha butcher two men with barely a thought, but she looked away from the remains of her former mother-in-law with a delicacy that surprised me. "I still had some hope that it would not come to this. That was foolish of me."

"She didn't leave me much choice."

Lady Kuzunoha shook her head. "No, your life was already worthless to her. Doubly so since you knew her secret. Speaking of that, how *did* you know?"

I started to clean my sword. "Lady Kuzunoha, I have just been forced to take a rather drastic step in the course of my duties. I'll answer your questions if you will answer mine. Agreed?"

She forced herself to look at Lady Akiko's body. "There is no reason to keep her secrets now."

"Very well. There were two things in particular. Someone put me on the trail of a *youkai* that was pretending to be you. Once I knew that you didn't send either it or those bandits, that left the question of who did. More to the point, you told me that Doshi was *mostly* fox, remember?"

She actually blushed. "Careless of me. I did not intend . . ."

I smiled grimly. "I know, and at first I thought you'd simply mis-spoken. But, assuming you had not, for Doshi to be more than merely half fox meant his father was at least part fox himself. How could this be? The simplest reasonable answer was Lady Akiko. Did Lord Abe know about his mother? Or himself?"

"No to both. Fortunately his fox blood was never dominant. Lady Akiko and I knew about each other all along, of course. She opposed the marriage but couldn't reveal me without revealing herself. We kept each other's secret out of necessity until—"

"Until Doshi was born?"

She nodded, looking unhappy. "I knew by then I couldn't stay, but I thought my son's position was secure. I was in error. There was too much fox in him, and Lady Akiko was afraid his fox nature would reveal itself, and disgrace the family. The position of the Abe family was always her chief concern."

"If the boy was such a danger, why didn't she just smother him in his sleep?"

Lady Kuzunoha looked shocked. "Murder her own grandson? Really, Yamada-san. Beside, it's easy enough to dedicate an unwanted child to some distant temple with no questions about his origin. In preparation, Lady Akiko had him hidden within the shrine complex, the Abe family is their foremost patron, so it was easy to arrange. Once I knew my son was missing it took me a while to follow his trail and to arrange a meeting."

"Duel, you mean."

She looked away. "Just so. While I may have hoped otherwise, it

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Midnight Hunt

We are often ashamed of our greatest weaknesses—that is, until we discover that they are often our greatest strengths.

BY SUSAN YI
ILLUSTRATION BY KEN MEYER JR.

IN THE DAYTIME, THE COURTYARD ARCHES hung with clumps of purple wisteria, feathery leaves, and vine Mother would sometimes brave the walk through the mansion, clutching Kyle's hand like a lifeline, just so she could sit in the sun under the drooping flowers. If the breeze blew just right, it plucked silky petals and caressed them against her face. And then, the rarest thing of all would happen: she would smile. And her scent would change from anxiety to pleasure Kyle wished he could freeze those moments for her, make them last all day and into the night. But of course, he couldn't stop the night from falling any more than he could stop the hunters from waking Nor did he want to

At night, the courtyard arches looked strangled by the vines, and the wisteria looked tumorous, the leaves like cobwebs. Kyle marveled to see the courtyard at night as he rushed past the arches. Mother always fled long before the sun fell, dragging him with her back to the nursery where the air was stale and trapping him all night with her musty human things. It was just as he had suspected At night, everything changed Excitement bubbled up in him

The wind blew, swaying the trees, shifting the shadows. Gray shapes skulked into the courtyard, their dark masses contrasted by the rainbow colors of the wraith horses they led. Midnight dogs barked and snapped at each other as hunters jerked their chains, cursing and kicking

Kyle slowed down to what he hoped was a dignified walk Heart pounding, he moved toward that familiar scent of musk and tang, dirt and flesh that was vaguely reminiscent of decay

Father marched to the center of the activity and gave orders. Wearing a white shirt and riding breeches, he looked every inch the lord in command. From this distance, Kyle couldn't see the gray, scaly patches on his skin. He hoped he would soon grow patches of his own, but feared he never would. He was already eleven and not a single gray spot had appeared. Why had he been cursed with all the human features of his mother?

Wraith horses pawed the cobblestones and pranced agitatedly. Father's crimson horse reared and screamed behind him, mane and tail writhing up as though a wind blew from the ground beneath. Kyle forgot to pretend this was not his first hunt and gawked at the magnificence of the sight. Father had told him that when *he* was young, wraith horses were treasures to be fought for and won. Now these rare-breeding horses outnumbered the thinning clan, but Father still doled them out as though it was an honor to receive one. Kyle knew how to ride them, of course, every member of the clan did, except Mother, but the training horses were old and sedate These looked wild and possessed. He couldn't wait to ride one.

"*Scat*, half-breed," Arnout hissed, his pug nose crinkling, his gray skin folding in ridges against his cheeks

"Father invited me," Kyle said, raising his chin.

"Invited?" Arnout bared sharp teeth. "The only way you'd be invited to a hunt is to be the prey."

Shame crept up Kyle's face. "I'm not a human." He knew Arnout could smell the shame and that intensified the feeling. "I'm not"

"Oh? Then maybe we should hunt your little mother instead of you. I always wanted to taste her." He licked his lip.

Kyle bared his own teeth and pounced on Arnout. Arnout, two years older and born with the strength of full blood, grabbed Kyle and slammed him onto the cobblestones. Clawed fingers locked around his throat and squeezed. Kyle tried to gulp air but could only suck in the thinnest trickle. His lungs burned and throat swelled.

Gathering around them, the hunters jeered and growled. Glassy eyes glared down at him and Kyle could see a puny reflection of himself, reflected a dozen times over in their eyes. Kyle tried to shove Arnout's hands away but the hands of cinching iron would not budge. Spots bloomed in his vision.

"Enough." Father's voice cut through the tumult.

The hunters quieted immediately, several of them instinctively taking a step back from Father. Arnout hesitated a moment before letting go of Kyle's throat.

Kyle gasped, trying not to look as though he had been scared. Father looked down at him the way he sometimes looked at one of his failed dog-breeding experiments. The old scar on his lip looked pale. Father's brother had given him that scar during their final fight for clan leadership and it always looked pale when he was annoyed. Kyle's head felt too heavy to lift. He dragged himself up, feeling the weight of everyone's stare.

"Arnout," Father said. "Show your brother his wraith horse."

"*Half*-brother," Arnout mumbled. He turned away and lumbered to a wraith horse with rolling eyes. Grabbing the reins, Arnout tossed them over his shoulder at Kyle without looking at him.

Catching the reins, Kyle stroked the translucent green hide, trying to ignore the raw pain in his throat. Liquid silk flowed through his fingers as he caressed the hide.

His very own wraith horse! The gold specs in the green hide reminded him of Mother's eyes. Behind him, Arnout whipped his rearing horse, calling it unfit even for humans.

"*Kyle.*"

He looked around to see who had whispered his name. Mother crouched in the shadow of the mansion, her dark hair and gown blending into the night so that it looked for a moment as though only her ghostly face floated in the gloom.

He blinked in surprise. She never went out alone in the dark. She was scared of hunters during the day but she was terrified of them at night. His heart sank. She would want him to escort her back to the nursery. And he would miss the hunt.

What if he pretended not to hear her?

No. She was worried about him. He looked around to make sure no one was watching—they weren't, they were all busy, checking hooves and stirrups, gathering the midnight dogs, trying to control the horses—and ran lightly over to Mother.

"Oh God, please don't go, Kyle," whispered Mother, clutching her rosary.

"I have to," he said gently. *I want to. I've been waiting ages to go.* "Please go back, Mother. You'll be safe in the nursery."

Tears filled her eyes. She offered him her rosary with trembling hands. "Take this with you."

He did not want it. It was a human thing. It hung between them, swinging gently.

After an awkward pause, Mother's hand sank, burying the rosary in the folds of her silk gown. Guilt gnawed at him. Such a small thing, why not take it and make her feel better? But it would betray him as being half human. Even if no one saw it, *he* would know he carried a human thing.

She blinked rapidly, tears glistening in her eyes. Kyle hugged her, smoothing her hair, impatient for the hunt to begin.

"Stop coddling him." Kyle dropped his arms and spun around. Father looked down upon them.

Mother's smell changed from the sweet scent of dread to the coppery smell of fear. Father looked at Mother, who shrank into herself, lowering her eyes. She always looked smaller and more fragile near him. Kyle stepped closer to her, hoping he could reassure her without having to hug her like a baby in front of Father.

"Mount up, Kyle," said Father. "The others are waiting."

The others were all staring at them, nostrils boldly flaring in the air as if they couldn't get enough of the scent wafting through the air.

THEY GALLOPED UNDER THE MOONLIGHT. KYLE'S wraith horse cut through the countryside as though it were gliding. It was better than he had imagined. The slightest lean prompted an immediate change of course as though his horse read his mind.

A light mist escorted them as the midnight dogs howled ahead. Two of the dogs leaped for each other's throats and writhed together on the road, growling and snapping. Their sleek muscles shone like polished metal. Kyle veered his horse around them.

Howls of pain crescendoed behind him. When he turned to look, the others were trampling the two dogs under their razor hooves. They laughed at him, pointing and jeering. He swore to himself that he would be the first to trample the dogs next time.

Ahead, a light moving down the road beckoned amongst the hills. Kyle sniffed the crisp air. It was pregnant with rain and the coming of fall. He caught the dusty smell of sheep and the tangy odor of crushed grass. And there, just beyond the sheep—a scent reminiscent of Mother. Humans.

Two women drove a wagon while a couple of men herded sheep beside them. The hunters pounded toward them and the humans paused, looking as though they sniffed the air, although Kyle knew they had no sense of smell. The men looked fearfully in all directions. Kyle had heard that the magic mist kept the prey from seeing the hunters. But somehow they sensed danger anyway, for the men jumped on the wagon and bolted into the night, abandoning their sheep.

The thrum of the churning hooves mingled with the howl of the midnight dogs, making Kyle's heart beat in time with the music of the hunt. Dust flew out behind the wagon, stinging his eyes and chafing his throat.

The dogs reached them first. They raced beside the wagon, growling and barking at the horses. Kyle galloped as fast as he could.

The wagon horses rolled their eyes and bared their teeth, reeking of panic. A woman madly drove the horses while the rest of the humans clung to the roaring wagon. They kept looking behind them as if they heard or felt something. A girl who looked a couple of years older than Kyle crouched in the corner of the wagon, sobbing.

Clawed fingers locked around his throat and squeezed. Kyle tried to gulp air but could only suck in the thinnest trickle.

The midnight dogs nipped and jumped on the wagon horses, sinking their fangs into the hide, until the horses kicked, bucked, and screamed.

The wagon tipped. Humans spilled out, tumbling onto the packed dirt. Lanterns broke. The wagon caught fire. The horses disappeared down the road, dragging the fiery wagon.

Humans lay scattered in the yard of a lonely cottage. The midnight dogs circled the prey, pacing impatiently while the hunters pulled up near them.

The humans coughed and moaned as they pushed themselves up. The mist seethed around them, keeping them from being aware of the hunters.

Father dismounted his horse. Kyle did likewise, unsure of what was expected of him.

Now that Kyle was off the wrath horse, he felt small and eleven again. He stood in the moon shadow of the horses, hoping no one would notice him.

The others rushed to the humans. One hunter licked a man's ear with a long tongue. The man coughed and said to his companion, "What in seven hells are you trying to do to us?" Disgust oozed out of his voice.

"Ride easy, my friend," said the second man anxiously. "You felt it too." He looked into the distance, straight through a hunter, as though still worried that something was chasing them. The hunter rubbed his chest against the second man and whispered in his ear. The man's face crinkled in revulsion. "Besides, everyone knows diseased luck follows you."

"Me?" said the first man. He marched over to the other man. Three hunters followed him, touching him, brushing him, breathing him. He thrust his face toward the second man. "At least I don't have to chase my own sister's skirts to feel like a man."

The second man pulled back his fist and struck the first man. The hunters moaned, breathing in the anger and fear, nourishing themselves.

A strange hunger gnawed at Kyle. His heart raced and his palms felt slick with sweat.

A few steps away, a hunter sucked on a woman's finger while she yelled at a girl to "shut up, shut up, shut up!" The girl cried hysterically, eyes wide and searching as though catching glimpses of shadows that shouldn't be there. Another hunter stroked her breast and licked her throat with a sharp tongue. She cried in gasping screeches. The woman slapped her. The hunters arched in ecstasy.

Despite the chill air, sweat trickled into Kyle's eyes. He gulped air that felt thin and insubstantial.

An old man ran into the cottage with a hunter on his back. Soon, the cottage was on fire. The woman dragged a stake and stuck it into the ground in front of the burning cottage. The old man and the woman dragged a kicking boy toward the stake while the village girl screamed at them to stop.

A hunter with flaps of peeling, gray skin hung about the screaming girl's neck, humping against her skirt. Another clung to the humping parasite, humping it in turn. Others scattered about the scene, clumped around each victim, licking the boy's horror stricken face, stroking the old man's groin, whispering in his ear, rubbing the woman's leg, breathing in nourishment as the villagers breathed out fear. One drifted from victim to victim in a trance of ecstasy, tracing his fingers along the prey's face, down the arms and up again before rubbing himself slowly against the villager.

Mouth dry, Kyle leaned forward, palms sweating, feeling the pull of the frenzy. The urge to plunge into the dance and lose himself in the ecstasy tugged at him. The enticing aroma of fear and passion made him take two steps toward the prey before he became aware of his motion.

"Go to the girl," said Father. Kyle was startled to see him silhouetted against the flames, his curly hair haloed by the glow of the fire. "She's yours."

Kyle ached to touch her, to taste the stew of her dark passions, to breathe in her terror, to caress it, bathe in it.

He took a shaky step, almost involuntarily. By the time he reached her, he was nearly sprinting. The other hunters slid off her and left her for him, perhaps in deference to Father, or simply in disgust at having to share with Kyle.

He pounced on the girl.

Her screams lessened as though some deep part of her felt reassured that the hunters had left her and that Kyle had replaced them. Anger spiked in him. He grabbed the girl, touched her wherever he wanted, squeezing her breasts, rubbing himself against her firm hips, licking her tender skin. Still, her sobs calmed.

Arnout laughed at him. The other hunters joined in mocking him. Kyle shook the girl. He bit her hard on her neck. The pitch of her cries rose and he felt some satisfaction. He shook his head like a dog worrying a cat. Blood oozed into his mouth and dribbled down his chin. The girl screamed hysterically. A tingle of pleasure shivered through him.

He released her neck and picked at the wound with his finger nail. The girl grabbed one of the men walking past her, screaming for help. The man grabbed the collar of her dress and shook her, yelling nonsensically into her face. The tingle of pleasure built into a climax. His muscles clenched, his vision darkened, and pleasure shivered through him. Oh God, it felt so good.

Oh God?

That was his mother's term, a human term. Awareness rushed back to him. The metallic smell of the blood trickling down the girl's neck turned his stomach. Had he done that? His mind recoiled. He noticed for the first time that the girl's wide eyes were green speckled with gold. Had he actually chewed on this poor girl's neck until it bled?

Bandages. He needed to find something to bandage her wound. She needed help, she needed —

A deep rumble sounded behind him. His father was laughing. Father looked at him with approval. Him, Kyle, not Arnout.

MOTHER LOOKED UP FROM HER ROSARY WHEN KYLE entered the nursery. She rose stiffly from her kneeling position. She stood surrounded by her crowded collection of human things—faded paintings once bright with flowers gifted to her by Father when they were young, smiling dolls dressed in moth-eaten silk. Father had gathered for her when Kyle was a baby; tiny glass figurines tinged with gold that Mother had once treasured but seemed to have forgotten about in recent years.

Worry lines etched her porcelain face, her eyes searching him as if trying to see whether he remained whole.

Kyle lowered his eyes, glad for once that she had a poor sense of smell. Could she smell her own kind on him? For the first time in his life, he held himself back when Mother hugged him.

"What happened?" she asked, gripping his arms.

"Nothing." He looked at her satin slippered feet.

"What did they make you do?"

Kyle kept silent, refusing to meet her eyes. Heat crept up his face.

She shook him briefly. "Tell him you can't go again. Tell him you're too human."

He bit his lip and stayed silent.

Mother dropped her arms and looked at him as though he had slapped her. She spun and grabbed a small bag. "Come. We're leaving."

Kyle simply stood and blinked.

"Kyle, we can't stay here any longer. Please hurry." She grabbed his hand and pulled.

Kyle shifted away from her. "I don't want to go, Mother."

Tears shimmered in her eyes. "You don't understand. I should have taken you away long before but I was too afraid. But now we must."

"I belong here. I can't live as... ." He was about to say "prey" but thought better of it.

"Don't make me leave you, Kyle." Her voice broke under the weight of her tears.

Would she really leave alone? Mother, who had always cowered in the hallways on the rare occasions when she stepped out of the nursery to help Father negotiate with humans for linen and velvet, candles and dogs? On those occasions, she had clutched Kyle's shoulder, giving him a bruise that lasted a week, wafting the aroma of dread everywhere she went. Kyle had been mortified during these excursions, as humiliated as any child whose mother walked around naked in public, dragging him behind her. Why couldn't she understand that she was calling attention to herself? Couldn't she see their nostrils flaring? Kyle could smell her scent for days afterward and Arnout never let him forget it.

Kyle envisioned her running through the halls alone tonight and coming face to face with Arnout. He sighed. Father would find them soon anyway. There was no need to upset Mother and leave her vulnerable.

Sneaking out of the mansion was far simpler than Kyle had imagined. All the hunters were sleeping after the hunt and the dogs were in their kennels behind the courtyard. The hunters would probably not wake until close to dusk. They simply walked out unchallenged past the gaping doorways of the empty nursery rooms, past the dark corridors steeped with the scent of sleeping hunters, down the sweeping stairs. They passed the kitchens where the old hunters made rabbit stew and venison for the old, the young, and Mother—food that Kyle had lately found less and less satisfying.

"You look surprised," said Mother as they rushed out to the courtyard and along the three-mile path to the village tavern.

"Father will be angry." He would not tolerate the loss of another hunter. That's what Kyle was now, a hunter, wasn't he?

"Yes. He was very angry the last time I tried to run away." A shadow passed over her features as though a dark memory clouded her mind. Or perhaps it was just the moon shadow of a branch. "That's why we're free to leave now. He believes I'd have to be insane to incur his wrath again."

When they reached the tavern, Mother bought rags and clothes. They changed their velvet and satin for scratchy wool and cotton. The clothes smelled of their last owner: horse, hay, sweat, dirt. Mother insisted they also wear gloves. "Keep them on, they'll hide your scent," she said. The smell of horse and sweat wafted up from the gloves.

Was it possible that Father would not find them?

While Mother paid the innkeeper, Kyle stood in the shadows outside the tavern door. What would their lives be like if Father never found them? Memories of the hunt prickled his skin. Father had been proud of him, at least a little. An echo of the hunt, the excitement, the ecstasy brought back the hunger. He shoved down the sensation.

The sooner they were back in the mansion, the safer Mother would be. He could not let her roam without clan protection. Yes, that was right. It would certainly be best for her to go back. He hushed the voice that asked if maybe, just maybe, he wanted to go back for himself, not for Mother.

He slipped off his glove, rubbed his hand against the door frame, then rubbed the glove below his own scent.

He sniffed the air while putting the glove back onto his hand. A stew of body odor, garlic, sex, and unwashed travelers' feet assaulted his nose. And percolating above it all, the thin scent of his own flesh. He followed it to the door frame where he had rubbed his hand. Just below it wafted up the unique combination of smells of his new clothes.

"We'll finally be free, Kyle," said his mother.

Kyle jerked straight. Guilt stabbed him when he saw the cautious hope in her eyes. She would cry for weeks when they went back to the mansion. He promised himself that he would pick flowers from the hillside to bring a smile to her delicate face. He might even refuse to join the hunt for a few months until she became used to the idea. Maybe.

The nags were dirt brown with dull eyes. When Kyle mounted the beast's sagging back, the horse clomped out of the courtyard with her head low as if already weary. They rode into the early dawn, floating a ribbon of scent behind them.

KYLE RODE SEDATELY BEHIND MOTHER UNDER THE dark, rumbling skies. Two days ago, Kyle would have automatically led Mother. She had always been fragile, and scared, and—human. But on that first day of their journey, Kyle had realized that Mother was no longer the same person who had cowered in the mansion's shadows. Or perhaps she was the same person but he had never recognized her moments of courage because he had been so lost in his fog of embarrassment. This Mother, the one he had never suspected before, knew how to start a campfire, confidently navigated their route by the stars, caught their dinner by making clever traps, smiled easily, even laughed a little.

Yesterday, Kyle had asked how she had learned to keep a fire alive in a drizzle. They sat huddled in front of an anemic fire beneath a leaky lean-to that Mother had fashioned out of branches and leaves. "I was a huntsman's daughter," she said, coaxing the fire.

Kyle's heart leapt. *I knew it. We're not human. My grandfather was a—*

"A *huntsman*, not a hunter," she said as if reading his thoughts. Nostalgia wafted from her. It was the only scent he could detect in the rain aside from the fire and the wet wool of their coats. He felt blind in the rain, even a weak drizzle like this one. Thunder rumbled in the distance.

"He was pure human, your grandfather. The best father there ever was." A smile crept up her face. The fire glow lent a flush to her cheeks as she leaned in to grab another branch. She didn't seem to notice the drips that wet their clothes, running down Kyle's neck, making the wool even scratchier.

"I used to tag along with him on most of his hunting trips," she said. "We'd sometimes stay out for weeks, living on the bounty the forest offered us. I was a wild child back then." Kyle could only imagine her being wild by skipping her nightly prayers with that rosary she always wore around her neck. And even then, she'd probably wake up in the middle of the night when she remembered, get down on her knees and pray.

SHE SMILED INTO THE FIRE, EYES FAR AWAY. IT WAS THE smile of a young girl and Kyle realized that she must have been only a few years older than him when she bore him. Strange that he had known nothing about Mother's family or her childhood when he knew the history of Father's line back four generations, back to the time when his grandfather's grandfather had broken all tradition and bargained with a human lord for the mansion in which they all now lived.

A flash of lightning in the distance brought Kyle back to the present. The drizzle that had plagued them last night had stopped but the skies rumbled and brewed on the twilight horizon as they moved toward it.

Could Father have lost their scent through the rain?

As if in answer, a dog howled in the distance. Mother's head perked as though testing the air for unseen dangers.

Kyle's heart picked up its pace when he caught the scent of midnight dogs and hunters. He could smell their excitement, not the rancidness of a feeding frenzy, but the acridness of a hunt. His blood pounded in response to the scent. It called to him. The urge to race through the night, to chase down his prey, to—

This was no retrieval mission of wayward family members. This was a hunt. Denial froze him, nostrils flaring, eyes wide. His own clan was hunting him.

"Run!" He kicked his horse into a gallop.

Mother turned her pale face toward him as she kicked her own horse. Fear wafted from her pores.

No, Mother! He wanted to yell at her. Why couldn't she understand that her fear made everything worse?

His nag lumbered through the mud ahead of Mother in a mockery of a gallop. He kicked his horse again. Why did she have to be so damned human? Why couldn't she—.

He still smelled it. He rode ahead of her and the scent still steeped him. Was it coming from the horse? The horse smelled of wet wool and fresh dung, nothing so delicious as fear. Where was the fear coming from?

Realization dawned on him. I'm prey. I smell just like them. Arnout was right. I was born to be prey.

"Come on! Move!" Mother yelled at him, passing him.

Kyle trotted beside her, knowing it was useless to try to outrun the wraith horses but trying anyway.

Dogs nipped at his horse. The pounding of hooves kept rhythm with his heart. Arnout laughed behind him, alarmingly close. They had not bothered with the magical mist this time and Kyle could

clearly see the hunters riding upon them

Mother screamed as a hairy hand shoved her off her horse Kyle leapted to try to catch her, but a steel hand gripped his arm and yanked him off his own horse

The ground rushed up and smashed into his cheek and ribs, slamming the breath out of him. Mud shoved its way into his mouth and up his nose. An image flashed in his mind of the fighting dogs being trampled under sharp hooves, and he remembered his vow to be the first to trample next time He curled up on the mud and squeezed his eyes tight His muscles clenched to ward off the sharp hooves.

A moment passed Then another Still, no hooves crushed his spine, no casual steps kicked his head.

"Get up," said Father

Kyle opened his eyes, lids seeming to resist him. Mud stung his eye and he wiped it away, coughing and spitting. He slowly got to

He wanted to tear out the eyes, to sink his teeth and fingers into the chest, and rip out the beating heart.

his feet like a drunken man. Mother did the same and he was relieved to see that she looked dazed but unhurt. Mud clumped in her hair and covered half her face, but her eyes were alert and clear

Father stood in front of the wraith horses which snorted white clouds and stomped restlessly. The hunters dismounted all around them. Arnout walked over and stood beside Father where Kyle should have been. Midnight dogs paced and growled behind Father as though his presence held them in check

"Kyle," said Father "Come here " Thunder rumbled in the distance

Kyle looked at Mother. A tear balanced on her bottom lashes, sparkling in the twilight She looked back at him with an intense expression in her eyes. The expression said, Listen to me, this is important! But he couldn't understand what "this" was. What was she trying to tell him? That she loved him? Sure, but there was more Was it something to do with her father the huntsman?

Frustration welled up in him. Despite having lived with her all his life, he knew virtually nothing about her, nothing about her people, nothing about how humans communicated through a look shot from mother to son.

A cold wind picked up a strand of silky hair and lashed her face with it She slowly nodded and he realized her message, whatever it was, was over and she was telling him to go to Father

A strange sense of loss gnawed at him, something like regret. He walked hesitantly toward Father, feeling traitorous Who had he betrayed? Father or Mother?

Father looked at her angrily. She stood proud, her chin defiant, her eyes calm, while the dogs growled and the horses snorted

His parents stared at each other on the twilight road Lightning flashed, silhouetting Mother's lonely figure. She stood with her shoulders back, head held high, fully meeting Father's gaze for the first time in Kyle's memory: She smelled ... fearless. A proud smile crept up Kyle's face.

The last twilight rays reflected a wet sheen off Father's eyes Before Kyle could make sense of it, Father lifted his hand, held it for a skin-tingling moment, then slapped the air

Midnight dogs rushed toward Mother as if gates had opened to let them out.

Kyle screamed. Arnout grabbed him as he fought to reach her. The giant dogs pounced on Mother. She fell back without a sound as though she had been expecting exactly this. The sleek coat of the dogs boiled in a pile where Mother had stood just a moment ago

Kyle gagged at the scent of his mother's anguish. It was like smelling her roasting flesh and then suddenly realizing that it made his mouth water

The hunters stiffened around him, breathing in her exquisite torment

Red eyes gleaming, fangs tearing, the dogs growled and snapped at each other over Mother. Her blood gushed onto the dogs and darkened the mud

Kyle twisted frantically against Arnout, trying to reach her long after she lay still shrieking until his throat felt raw.

A gritty, wet tongue licked his throat. He spun around, lashing out against Arnout. Something sucked on his hand, flicking a slimy tongue at the juncture between his fingers A hairy body rubbed against him

Screaming, he thrashed, shoving and kicking Arnout, still holding him, whispered, "You don't taste nearly as good as your mother. Half-breed."

Kyle frantically clawed at Arnout He wanted to tear out the eyes, to sink his teeth and fingers into the chest, and rip out the beating heart. He kicked Arnout in the knee, drove his fingertips into his throat, trying desperately to rip it out. They fell together and Kyle landed on him, hands clamped tight around his brother's throat Arnout's eyes widened and uneasiness bloomed behind the dark irises. Through his haze of fury, Kyle dimly realized the other hunters were backing away from him.

"Enough," said Father

Arnout closed his eyes and relaxed Another wave of fury pounded Kyle Why should Arnout be able to relax when Mother would never be able to relax again? He squeezed his grip harder on Arnout's throat. Arnout opened his eyes wide. Panic and fear pulsed from him.

"I said, *enough*."

Kyle barely heard Father above the pounding in his ears. He braced for hands to grab and pull him off Arnout.

But they never did. He breathed in Arnout's pain and watched his brother's face turn red and swell, darken and stiffen Kyle's forearms bulged with veins until they felt as swollen and as ready to burst as Arnout's face.

Gradually, Kyle noticed Arnout getting colder and sounds and smells returned to him He loosened his stiff fingers and let go Arnout did not move

Father watched him with a grim fascination. "Sooner than expected," he said, nodding. "I always knew your kind would be more vicious. Kyle, you'll ride beside me from now on." Hunters shuffled uneasily around him

THE SMELL OF RAW MEAT OVERWHELMED THE familiar scent Kyle had hoped to detect. Mounds of flies buzzed on what once was Mother. The dogs had been sloppy and had left plenty of meat on the bones for the flies and birds. Her rosary lay torn a few steps beside her, gleaming in the weak light of the dawn

He had walked away from the clan while they slept in a grove outside a nearby village. The hunters had gorged themselves on villagers after they had left Mother Kyle had stood in the shadows all night, not participating.

A fat drop of rain splashed on his cheek. He looked up at the roiling sky. The clouds were finally bursting It would be one of those furious storms that washed away all scents with its pounding rain until the world smelled fresh and clean as though nothing had ever walked on it

He bent to pick up Mother's rosary Half the beads were gone and he was careful not to lose any more. Human things, he thought The rosary felt warm in his hand, the weight just right

He tied it around his neck, adjusting it, getting used to the weight of it Turning away with his head bowed, he walked alone into the scent-washing rain.

MOMENTS *of Grace*

We are all products of our past. Sometimes, to move forward, we need to set the past aside.

By Aaron Schutz
Illustration by Joe Kovach

TALL AND SCARECROW THIN, the old man picked his way along County Highway Three under an overcast autumn sky, wind flapping pants about long, knobby legs. Bent a little under his small pack, he stabbed his cane out to steady himself. There was a strange gracefulness to his gait, oddly magnified by his antique black bowler hat, black wool suit, skinny black tie, and silver-tipped walking stick. His age slowed him down a little, but showed mostly in the white hair peeking out from under his hat, and in his face and hands. Darkened in the light of too many summers to a patchy coffee color, his skin had not wrinkled but instead had cured tight, like plastic wrap, revealing the myriad shifting muscles and bones of his skeletal figure.

In no hurry, with no particular place to go, he paused occasionally to look out across the wide fallow fields that stretched around him, flat as a table to the horizon in every direction. His dark eyes took in the forms of scattered boxy houses, old barns, new and rusting old farm equipment, and the occasional distant line of trees.

At one point the skitter of hundreds of late-migration swallows alongside the road caught his gaze. He stopped and leaned on his walking stick for a while. Individual birds settled, momentarily, in the chaff of a harvested wheat field before leaping back into the air. Then—suddenly—as if responding to some inaudible call, the birds swirled together into a single rippling skein of cloth and hurled themselves into the cloud-furrowed sky. Their scattered cries cut into him like sharp nails. For a moment, for the smallest flicker of time, the man fled the land with them, enveloped in their dreams of southern heat … before falling back to himself, alone again on the highway.

Few vehicles passed him on that desolate road. Occasionally, a car or mud-streaked pickup or milk truck whipped by, ignoring him, spinning along in a bubble of high-beam brightness, throwing shadows out against the gray land. Soon after the sparrows left, however, a rusty little blue hatchback slowed down and stopped after passing him. For a moment it just sat there. Then its backup lights clicked on, and it rolled slowly back. When it reached him, the old man found himself face-to-face with a pudgy young woman with dark hair. Her curious look disappeared in surprise when she saw his skeleton face. But he gave her his widest smile—teeth white as new snow. He reached up and tipped his hat to her.

Through the car's window he could see a name tag on her cheap, stained polyester uniform shirt that said "I'm your server!" and then underneath, "Betty." Her makeup had streaked a little around her eyes. She had been crying.

Recovering after a moment, she regarded him suspiciously, then cranked her window down a little.

He tilted his head a little and sniffed. He smelled death.

"Hey, Mister," she said. "You, OK?"

The old man gave her another smile and nodded.

"Where you headed? It's a long way from here to anywhere."

He thought for a second. Then he languidly pointed in the direction he had been walking.

"What's the matter? You don't talk or something?"

He shrugged. Bringing one spindly finger up across his pursed lips, he made a shushing sound.

"Well, you're an odd one, aren't you," Betty said. And then after a moment, "Well, hell, you don't seem dangerous to me. Hop in, if you want. I'm going about thirty miles. I'll drop you wherever you like. Better'n walking."

He thought for a moment on this, looking up into the overcast sky. He sensed ... something wrong in this woman, in the path she was traveling, in the history trailing after her sad little car like the sparkling tail of a comet. But when he tried to shake his head, he found himself nodding yes, instead. As always, he fell uncertainly from now into then.

Betty grabbed at handfuls of fast-food wrappers, shoveling them into the back seat as he walked slowly around the car. "Don't get much call for passengers," she apologized.

Stuck at first, the door finally opened with a squeal after he gave it a solid yank. He folded himself into the front seat, knees near his chest, feet scuffling a little in the detritus before settling into the mat. He placed his pack carefully down between his legs and his bowler hat on one knee. The scent of death filled the car, and he glanced around.

"Look," she said, the car stuttering as she turned the key, "I gotta pick up my daughter before I head home, OK?"

He shrugged. She shifted gears, and the car died with a thump. "Piece of shit!" she exclaimed, slapping the dash.

The old man twisted his body around to look in the back, attention drawn to an object the size of a loaf of bread wrapped in a towel, now scattered with wrappers. Before Betty tried the car again, he tapped her lightly on her shoulder. Reaching across his body, he pointed a finger at the bundle, looking a her with a quizzical expression.

"Huh?" she said, and he pointed again. She looked, and then, relatively light, in fact it was quite heavy. *The weight of memories,* he thought as he often did, opening it up on his lap, carefully, since the aging plastic binding had begun to crack. A bunch of sheets, different kinds and colors of paper, some yellowed with age, were jammed loosely in its front pocket. Others were clipped carefully into the rings. Turning to the last page with writing on it, he pulled a stubby pencil out of the inside back cover.

"How the hell?" He shrugged, grabbed his nose, and sniffed loudly a couple of times. "Oh— shit," she said, pausing for a moment and looking down. Then in a quiet voice, "It's Dumptruck. Our cat." She shook her head. "He was so old, but ... It's still hard." She stopped and rubbed her eyes hard with the palms of her hands. "The vet said there wasn't much chance, and, well, all that money. ... Damn! Anyway. Jessie is going to be so upset..." The old man drooped his face into a sad expression as she looked up. His hands came up and he drew his fingertips down beneath his eyes, as if he were crying. "Yeah," she said, smiling a little as her tears started again. She wiped her face quickly with an already grubby polyester sleeve, then turned and gave a violent twist to the car key. The little car shook, the engine growling and whining for a while before it finally caught. She eased them back onto the highway in an acrid cloud of blue smoke.

Betty jerked to a halt on a small parking lot jostling with cars, parents, and red-faced kids in front of a squat building surrounded by hurricane fencing. On one side, a sawdust playground was filled with brightly colored plastic structures: swings, tubes, slides, and monkey bars. "Just give me a minute," she said, getting out and walking quickly toward the building.

The old man took in the youthful chaos around him for a moment, a corner of his mouth quirking up in a smile. Then he bent over and opened his pack, drawing out a battered pink padded-plastic three-ring binder covered with simple drawings of daisies. His fingers tingled a little at the touch. Although it looked

> FOR A MOMENT, FOR THE SMALLEST FLICKER OF TIME, THE MAN FLED THE LAND WITH THEM, ENVELOPED IN THEIR DREAMS OF SOUTHERN HEAT ...

He twirled the tip of the pencil absently in his mouth, gazing thoughtfully into space before drawing a line underneath the last entry on the page, and writing:

bird cloud
feathers dark swirl
leaps to smoke-gray sky,
calling out for southern sun.

Not quite right, he thought. It never was. Yet, as he ran his fingers lightly over the new text, it tingled almost imperceptibly with the energy of live experience.

He closed his notebook. A minute later, the back door to his left sprang open.

A small, wiry girl with long brown hair clambered into a booster seat behind the driver's seat. "Hey, Mister!" she shouted at him.

"Jessie, let me help you with that," Betty said, but Jessie batted her mother's hands away. "I can do it myself," she said firmly, pulling her seatbelt across her and searching intently down beside her for the connection.

After she clicked it in, the girl looked up into the old man's face,and laughed in surprise. "Mister, you are freaky!" she said. Betty shushing her as she checked her daughter's seatbelt. "But he is, Mom. Look at his face!"

Betty looked apologetically at the old man, but he just smiled. As Betty got into the driver's seat, he gazed impassively at Jessie as

she examined his face. Then, suddenly, the old man spread his lips wide, goggled his eyes wider than seemed possible, twitching his nostrils open

"Woah!" said the Jessie, surprised, and then she started laughing as he stuck his tongue out at her. She stuck her tongue out back at him, and they bobbed their heads at each other for a moment, tongues out, until the old man finally relented. "Beat you!" Jessie said. They both laughed at this, the old man's raspy huss joining her bubbling giggle

Looking back at Betty, the old man saw her shaking her head, but smiling in spite of herself. She turned the key and the car shook and rattled, but didn t start. Gripping the key tightly, she tried it a couple more times, pumping the gas until finally the engine stopped even sputtering, turning over with a whine but not catching "Damn!" she said, laying her forehead on the steering wheel.

"What's the matter, Mom?" her daughter asked

"It's not going to go, sweetheart," Betty said. She turned to the old man apologetically "Fraid you picked the wrong car She started opening her door, "I'm gonna call a tow truck. More money. You're free to wait, if you want—all the good it'll do you."

But before she could get up, the old man reached out and grasped her shoulder firmly, holding her in her seat Her deep sadness invaded him through the contact She looked back at him and he released her, holding his hands out, palms open, in a gesture for her to wait. "What?" she asked, a little peeved He just indicated *wait* again, and then turned to the cracked notebook in his lap.

"You know something about cars?" she asked. But he didn't respond He slowly paged back through the well-handled pages, looking for just the right one When he found it, he placed his palm lightly against the words written there and fell back into the memory—one of his favorites. Somewhere in the West, he had watched a bike race in the mountains. So beautiful, the sleek bodies and spidery carbon-fiber frames gliding up the inclines as if gravity, for that moment, was overcome, wheels hissing through the sheen of water laid down by a light fall mist.

He looked up, and she was still watching him. He sighed and moved his hand from his notebook, laying his fingers lightly on the dashboard Then, in the scratchy voice he used so infrequently, he told the tired little car what was written there on the page·

Discs and legs devour rain-clad
mountains
the rush of wind only carries
them on

And through his arm, down through his hand, he felt the moments of that day rushing away from him, and with them, memories that surrounded them, as well—of camping by a stream filled with red crawfish, of a thunderstorm that exploded out of an empty sky, of walking through the night under the stars … All these, and more, flowed out of him, leaping, finally, from tingling fingertips into the dirty, cracked plastic of the dash They tore a hole from the fabric of his self

He looked up, and Betty was watching him suspiciously. "I thought you couldn't talk," she said. He just shrugged sadly, and looked back down at the page, where the words lay, dead and drained, just words He no longer remembered what they referred to—another scrap of his past lost to him, forever.

"Hey," Jessie asked from the back, "what're you guys doing?"

As the old man put his notebook back in his pack with one hand, he made a motion like twisting keys with his other, urging Betty to try the ignition again. "Alright," she said, doubtfully. But when she turned the key, the car hummed almost silently awake. She tentatively put it in gear and it almost got away from her before she lightened up on the gas. As they spun onto the highway, the car felt light, dipping perceptibly as they turned. As they sped up, the ride was smooth, but at the same time, the old man felt as if he could feel the roughness of the asphalt below them through the frame

"Cool!" Jessie said, "It's like flying "

Getting used to the feel of the ride, Betty cocked her head at the old man. "What the hell did you do?" she asked.

The old man remained silent After a moment, he placed his hands on his chest and then swept them forward and down, as if he were opening himself up to the car's engine. Then he shrugged sadly and looked away from her into the passing fields, shadows lengthening in the late afternoon light

They were silent for a while, Jessie humming to herself in the back "Well, fu—" she glanced back at her daughter, "darn it," Betty finally said. "Tell you what, I won't tell the Methodists if you don't " She laughed bitterly "That sure would freak the holy bastards, I tell you."

A little while later, Betty pulled off the highway at a dirt road. "Well," she said, "this is as far as I go." The old man nodded his understanding and reached for the door handle.

"Mom," Jessie said from the back, "why doesn't he come home with us?"

The old man held his hands up, indicating it wasn't necessary, but Betty said, "Yes, sweetheart, I was thinking the same thing. Probably crazy, and you may regret it, mister, but you are welcome to come have dinner with us. And there's a couch. Not too lumpy—better'n you've had recently, if I'm guessing right."

The old man knew he should get out, should keep walking But he did not. He nodded his thanks and tipped his hat to them on his knee, which got a laugh from Jessie

A few miles down the road, they parked beside a small, boxy house with a large picturewindow looking out on a ragged lawn scattered with toys As the old man unfolded himself from his seat, Jessie jumped out and ran around the car to him. He settled his bowler on his head and Jessie grabbed his other hand. "Come see my room," she said, and pulled him toward the house as he scrabbled to grab his cane and his pack. He looked back and saw Betty tenderly lifting the towel-wrapped bundle containing Dumptruck out of the back seat.

AS JESSIE DRAGGED HIM through to her room, the old man was surpnsed, given Betty's car, how clean the house was, scruffy furniture carefully placed, maroon carpet stained but well vacuumed. In her bedroom, Jessie showed the old man her favorite toys, announced the names of her stuffed animals, and asked him if he'd play a game with her. They had just taken out Chutes and Ladders when Betty called to her "Jessie, can you come here for a moment?"

They both came into the living room at the front of the house, and the old man stood back as Betty kneeled down next to her daughter, laying the bundle before both of them. "Sweetheart," Betty said, "you know poor Dumptruck wasn't feeling well?"

"Yes," Jessie said solemnly. "but the doctor's going to make him better."

"Sweetheart," Betty said, tears starting to flow, "I'm sorry. Doctor Davis, he did what he could. But Dumptruck, he was feeling really bad, and there wasn't anything we could do for him " She ran her hand lightly over the bundle before them. "He just couldn't live anymore, sweetie. I'm so sorry."

"Dumptruck died?" Jessie asked, and her mom nodded Jessie started crying too. "Mommy, he was just a little sick. He can't be dead."

"Oh, sweetheart, I'm sorry," she placed her hand on the bundle "He's right here. He just went to sleep, except this time he's never going to wake up "

"But I didn't get to say goodbye!"

"Sweetie, you know when they talk about heaven in church? Well Dumptruck has gone away to a better place. I think he can hear you if you say goodbye to him now."

Jessie thought about that for a moment, wiping away her tears. Then she asked, "Can we have a funeral? Just like we did for Grandma?"

"Sure, Sweetie I'll tell you what, we can bury him out under the

walnut tree in the back. You know how much he loved climbing up in that tree."

"Yeah," Jessie said, smiling through the tears, "Remember that time he got stuck at the top and Daddy had to get a ladder to get him down?"

"OK, Jess. Go get your coat back on, and we'll have our funeral." As Jessie went back to her room, Betty looked up apologetically at the old man. "You are welcome to come to our funeral if you want, or you can just stay here."

The old man nodded, indicating she should go ahead outside. She reverently lifted Dumptruck's body and headed back through the house. He heard them both go outside, the screen door slamming behind them. He went over to the couch against the front window where he had left his pack and took out his Memory Book. It took him only a moment to find what he was looking for. He picked up his walkingstick as he headed out.

By the time he came outside, Betty already had a shovel out and was digging a hole next to a tall, scarred tree. He walked over and looked up. From underneath it seemed as if the treeless branches were hundreds of fingers grasping up into the gray sky.

When Betty was finished digging, she lifted Dumptruck up and held him before her. "God," she said, facing the tree, "we stand here to return Dumptruck, to you. He was our friend. He kept us warm at night and kept us company in the bad times. Please take care of him for us." Then she laid him down in the hole.

BETTY STEPPED BACK, AND JESSIE came forward. "Dumptruck," she said, tears running down her face, "I'm sorry about that time I tied you to roller-duck, and I'm sorry I sometimes threw you off the bed. I'm sorry you have to go away from us. I don't know why God took you away from us." She stopped for a moment, then she kneeled down and placed a couple of items in with the body, one after the other. "Dumptruck, I hope you are happy in heaven. Here's a furmouse for you to chase, and here's your favorite ball." She stood up. "Goodbye, Dumptruck," she said.

Then, before either of the others moved, the old man came up beside Jessie. He called into his mind the time he was walking the roads near an enormous forest fire. He remembered cresting a hill and suddenly, down below him, seeing enormous sheets of orange-yellow flames leaping from the crowns of a thousand dying trees, their heat and light reaching out to him over a mile away. Holding his walking-stick by its handle, he lifted it high above his head, pointing its silver tip in the direction of the sinking sun, almost invisible behind the clouds. In a harsh voice that rumbled like quiet thunder across the open land around them, he called out for the *Fire in the West!*

And for the last time he found himself again on the peak of that hill, facing the raging flames, smelling boiling pitch and pine as this memory and other memories—chatting with ash-stained flame jumpers, pulling succulent meat from the burned carcass of a rabbit, resting on a boulder by a green lake—gathered in his chest. They streamed out through his arm into the ancient wood of his cane, finally lofting away from its metal tip like tiny sparks, leaving streaks as they sailed into the sky toward the nearly invisible sun.

For a moment nothing happened, all three of them waiting almost without breathing. And then the clouds covering the sun rolled magically apart like waves of the sea. A strangely flickering, flame-orange ray of sunlight leaped out through this gap and across the gray land, bathing them with the intense warmth of a summer's day. They stood silent for a while, suffused with illumination that gave a soft halo to their skin, the limbs of the tree, and the objects and still body in the grave. Then, slowly, the memories lost their power, the clouds billowed closed and the crisp autumn air swept back over them again.

Still they didn't move for a while, each lost in his or her own silences. Drained, the old man leaned on his stick. Almost unconsciously, he reached out as if to grasp back time, the moments that had left him, but there was nothing there. Then Jessie suddenly said, "I'm cold, Mom," jolting Betty into action.

"Just a moment, sweetheart," she said. Betty quickly filled the hole back up with dirt, tamping it down with the flat of the shovel. As they walked back inside, Betty touched the old man's arm. "Thank you," she said simply.

As the day faded away in the land beyond the living room window, the old man played with Jessie on the carpet. He was horse to her knight and then transformed into the dragon that she slayed, his mobile features taking on the equine and the lizard, with a blowing breath from which one could actually imagine flames emerging.

Betty changed into a T-shirt and denim jumper and made hamburgers and green beans for dinner. Then it was Jessie's bedtime, and Jessie read her picture books to the old man, who listened attentively and laughed at all the right places. Then he kissed her on the cheek and tucked her in, roughing his fingers through her hair before turning off their light. "Goodnight, old man," Jessie murmured sleepily as he closed her door.

He found Betty sitting sideways, lotus-like, on the couch. She held a glass of some smoky liquor in one hand, a thin cigarette in the other, tapping the ash occasionally into a mug of water on the floor beside her. She patted the cushion in front of her, indicating he should sit.

"He'll be here, by and by," she said. "It's better that he sees you right up front. Otherwise he might think I'm hiding you."

The old man gave her a quizzical look.

"Who are you, I wonder?" she said. "I almost feel like you should know me already—and you do, I think, in some ways, but not in others." She took a sip. "Want some?" she asked. He shook his head, no.

"You see, I'm not from around here. Just passing through. Hitchhiking, actually, like you. Trying to *find myself*, I thought. And I met *him*, you know." She laughed. "He gave this asshole I was riding with a speeding ticket. Shit ... I told the guy to slow down. Anyway, I didn't want to go any farther with that guy, and Trooper Ray—that's his name—he offered me a ride. And then dinner. And then, what the heck, he seemed like fun." She paused, taking a drag and blowing it out with pleasure. "Anyway, I was on the pill, but I guess I forgot once, and, hey! what do you know? I was pregnant.

"I was a free spirit kind of girl, you know. And I was just like, OK, abortion time. I mean, what did I need with a kid? But I made the mistake of telling him, and that was the end of that. He told his parents, and they told everyone else, and there weren't any abortions happening to some kid of his. This place," she indicated with a sweep of her cigarette hand, "everybody knows everything about everybody. Un-fucking-believable. Anyway, he wanted to get married, and everybody thought I was crazy when I refused. His dad's a minister, for Christ's sake. They take their God seriously around here—straight, no chaser, if you know what I mean. But, hey, this was just supposed to be a stop on the road. I mean, Ray seemed nice and all, but not exactly Einstein upstairs, if you know what I mean." She sighed.

"And that's when I really learned who he was. He wouldn't let me out of his sight. And he told his other cop friends to keep an eye out. I tried to hitchhike out of here a couple of times, and they just brought me back. The second time, well, he made sure not to hurt the baby—but I got the message." She rubbed her mouth, "Almost lost a tooth, that time." She shrugged. "I didn't try that again. But I still didn't marry him. I got a job at the café down by the highway and rented this place—cheap—one of his brothers owns it. Don't exactly like that, but what choice did I have."

She looked up at some headlights coming down the road. "Well, speak of the devil," she said, "That's probably him now. Nothing if not reliable."

The old man turned to look, and a car pulled off the highway in front of the house—hard to see in the dark, but with a rack of

lights up top. A man sat shadowed inside, and the old man felt a gaze intently meeting his through the window. Then the man got out of the car, settling his wide-brimmed hat square on his head and walked stiffly, straight up, chin tilted down, hand on his gun, up to the front door. He hammered on it so hard that the little house shook. "Who've you got in there? Bring the bastard out!"

Betty gave the old man a shrug with a disgusted quirk of her mouth. "I'm coming, Ray. Don't get your little nuts in a bind, man." She put down her glass, walked to the door, and swung it open so hard it slammed against the wall. "Come on in," she said, with a fake sweetness, but Ray shoved her to the side as he strode in. "Who the hell are you?" he asked the old man, and then he seemed to take in the old man's skeletal figure. The old man looked up into Ray's face. "What the fuck?" Ray asked. He turned to Betty, "Where'd you turn up this corpse?"

Even from across the room, the old man felt Ray's emotions like a slap in the face. A miasma of pain and despair emanated from the trooper like a heavy cloud. Here was the reason he was here, the old man thought. He wanted to leave, now, even after meeting Jessie. But he knew he wouldn't. The tale had not yet played itself out.

Betty took a drag on her cigarette and blew the smoke in Ray's direction. "I found him on the road and brought him home. He seemed lost. Take a good look—you think he's really a threat to my *reputation*, Raymond?"

Ray looked from the old man to Betty and then back again, and seemed a little confused. "You're not some pedophile freak, are you?" he asked the old man, and the old man didn't respond, just calmly watched Ray's eyes.

"Jessie likes him," Betty said, "and I like him. So unless you're gonna drag him out of here and make a scene or something, well, I'm keeping him. Long as he wants to stay." She looked at the old man intently, daring him to get up and leave.

"Well, shit," Ray said. "Anything funny happens, and somebody is gonna get hurt!" he declared to no one in particular, and then he stomped out, leaving the door open. After a moment they heard his car door slam, and he peeled back out onto the road with squealing tires. Betty stood in the door, watching him go.

After a minute or so, Jessie called out from her bedroom, "Is Daddy gone?"

"Yes, Sweetheart," Betty said. "Go back to sleep, now."

Betty looked at the old man sitting motionless on the couch, hands folded across his lap. "Well," said Betty, "that Ray, he's a man of few words, isn't he." She gave a short laugh. The old man looked up at her; he pantomimed drinking and pointed to her abandoned glass. "Yeah," said Betty, "that's a common response after meeting old Ray."

That night, after Betty had gone to bed, the old man lay on the couch, his head propped up on a pillow over the armrest. Wrapped in a blanket she had given him, the old man was warmer than he had been for a long time. His long legs hung over the other end of the couch. He didn't mind.

He paged back through his Memory Book, touching the scattered times that still lived in its pages, exploring those fragments of his life he still held onto: the taste of coffee from a paper cup as homeless men fell asleep around him on shelter cots, the call of an eagle as it fell out of the sky toward its prey; an old woman kissing her pigtailed granddaughter on the porch as he passed by, the smell of dust from the back of a pickup, tearing across hard-pan and brush in the Southwest, light and dark cascading out of the sky at dusk from the edge of the Grand Canyon; the abrupt violence of a barfight.

But not so many as there had been. Slowly, over the past few years, he had felt as if his life were emptying out, moments spent and not replaced.

And then his prized possessions. A few of those pages loosely stuffed into the front inside pocket of his book. Old, so old. He did not know how old. He had forgotten. But crackling and yellow with age. Not many memories—just a few—just enough, together, to fill out the skein of his early life. A glimpse of his mother's face; a moment in the garage with his father; catching a ball thrown by his uncle, the paper stars pasted across the ceiling of his bedroom. These memories and a few others held him grounded in a world that seemed increasingly at sea as he flung himself progressively away in snatches of speech.

He closed his eyes, holding these pages in his hands, traveling back across these few moments of his life as he fell deeply into sleep.

In the morning, Betty slouched slumber-eyed past the old man and retrieved her uniform shirt and his few pairs of underwear and two white dress shirts from the dryer in the basement. She made breakfast as the old man helped Jessie tie her shoes. Around the kitchen table, sleepy silent, they drank orange juice and ate eggs.

> [AND FOR THE LAST TIME HE FOUND HIMSELF AGAIN ON THE PEAK OF THAT HILL, FACING THE RAGING FLAMES, SMELLING BOILING PITCH AND PINE ...]

"Look," Betty said to the old man after a while, "you're welcome to stay. I really mean that. But I can't leave you here alone. I'm sorry; that's just too much. But why don't you come with me to work. You can hang out and then come back when I get off."

The old man shrugged, nodded.

They dropped Jessie off at her kindergarten. She raced inside, calling out to a friend alighting from another car, open coat billowing out behind her like a cape.

FINALLY, THEY PARKED IN the enormous lot of a sprawling truckstop amid rumbling, motionless semis. Betty pinned her name tag back on her shirt. It had rained that night while they slept, and the air smelled clean over the slick, yellow lined asphalt. They walked to the cedar-shaked Family Restaurant that extended out beyond rows of flat-roofed, fluorescent-lit gas pumps. Another waitress gave him a sidelong glance, but otherwise he was largely ignored by the few scattered clientele. Betty set him up in a small booth by the windows with a cup of coffee and left him to go to work.

For a long time, he just sat and watched. He did not spend much time in truckstops. They were places out of time. The world outside moved on, but in a truckstop humanity flowed, faster or slower, peppy or tired, in one long endless filmloop. Families with loud kids jostled up against unshaven truckers. New couples tumbled out of cars with mattresses strapped to the roof. Sunbirds stepped daintily from enormous RVs into line with daughters lost in the misery of mourning over a lost parent. To his table came fragments of stories, voices and emotions wafting almost imperceptibly through the air.

He watched Betty as she served. He admired her fluid movements with broad trays of food. In motion, her chunkiness took on

a kind of solid strength. She was a chatty waitress, joking with kids, fending off a lonely trucker's sad advance, eliciting stories from senior citizens, advising lost tourists with wide arm motions and pointing fingers.

And he noticed when she spent extra time with a blond, clean-shaven, shy farmer, gray mud still clogged to his boots. She watched the blond from across the room while chatting with another waitress, and the blond shot looks at her when he thought she wouldn't notice (but she did). Betty's waitress friend smirked a little at Betty's glances, but didn't say anything. The old man shivered with anticipation when Betty's fingers lingered just a little too long on the blond man's as she took his credit card. *I am here to witness this*, he thought.

After a while, the old man put his bowler back on and wandered outside. He gazed out over the highway flanking the parking lot, watching cars and semis whoosh by, oblivious to this wide spot in the road. Later, he visited the truck shop that sprawled behind the pumps, exploring its chrome truck add-ons, audio tapes for rent, video games growling to themselves in a dark back corner, bags of chips, soda, and cologne. He lingered over its assortment of glass and pewter figurines. With a little of his money, he bought a white stuffed kitten, small enough to close his hand around.

Then he returned to the cafe for more coffee to wait out the rest of Betty's shift.

That night, he presented the kitten to Jessie with a flourish and a smile. She squeaked with delight, declaring that its name was "Princess" before running off to her room to play.

two of them outside. She didn't invite him in. The old man watched from the picture window as Jessie grabbed her father's hand and swung it in excitement as they walked slowly to Ray's pickup.

A couple of weeks later, Jessie returned from Ray's family quieter than usual. As she was getting ready for bed, she confided in her mother that her dad had gotten "mad" again. "Sometimes, he scares me," she said.

"I know, Sweetie," Betty said, kneeling down next to her daughter. "He's not a perfect person. But he's your daddy, and he loves you more than anything."

"Yeah," Jessie said, "but I just wish he didn't get so *mad*."

"Me too, Sweetie," Betty told her. She looked over at the old man and sighed. "Me too."

HOW MANY DAYS PASSED, he did not know. But even as he felt more and more a part of a funny little family with Betty and Jessie, his time also seemed somehow empty. He felt, as he often did, like an observer in someone else's life. Since the cloud of birds on the highway he had not written again in his Memory Book. A few times, when playing with Jessie or listening to Betty's whiskey-slurred speech, or taking in the chaos of a family roiling chaotically around one of the tables in the restaurant, he had felt on the cusp of a moment of grace. But the feeling always subsided. He felt... between, and he waited.

His reverie ended early one weekday morning, so early that the

> SLOWLY, OVER THE PAST FEW YEARS, HE HAD FELT AS IF HIS LIFE WERE EMPTYING OUT, MOMENTS SPENT AND NOT REPLACED.

The days that followed fluttered by like leaves of a book laid open in the wind, similar and yet different at the same time. The old man helped Jessie get ready in the morning and played with her at night when she wasn't on sleep-over at another kid's house or with her dad. After Jessie went to bed, if Betty was not too tired, Betty sometimes talked to him. Sometimes she talked about her past. She spoke of her childhood in Chicago and of dropping out of college, cutting loose from her parents.

She told him of her friends, the waitresses, the few members of Ray's family she got along with ("They know he's a nut, but what can they do . . ."), the other parents of kindergartners, and the regulars at the restaurant. "Good people," she said. "Solid. Rooted here—except the kids: all running to get away, like me at their age, I guess. Anyway, people support each other. Dunno. Like nobody out here lacks family. At first I thought I'd die out here. I mean, a waitress? What kind of shit is that. But I guess it forced me to see other things." She shrugged. "Would be tough to leave, now. Even with Ray."

Never, however, did she speak of the blond man who visited her every day in the restaurant, who met her out back, sometimes.

A few days after the old man arrived, on Saturday, Ray came dressed in overalls and a jean jacket to pick up his daughter. Jessie was excited if a little wary. She didn't run to Ray the way she ran to her mother when Betty picked her up at school. But she gave her dad a big hug and kiss, and on Friday night she had talked about how much fun she would have on her grandfather's farm, feeding the chickens, milking the cows, and riding the tractor. Ray brought Jessie back Sunday night after church.

Betty and Ray didn't speak much. Betty just handed him Jessie's things, gave her daughter a peck on the cheek, and then left the

sun had not yet painted any light into the sky. The old man jolted awake as the front door smashed open, flinging long splinters of wood across the room.

A tall man appeared backward in the opening, dragging a large, heavy bundle with him, sliding it around inside on the carpet until it slammed into some shelves by the door. Books and knickknacks spilled all over the floor.

In the weak glow of the nightlight plugged into the base of one wall, the old man saw Ray's face, tight with rage, his trooper uniform shirt torn open. The old man could feel Ray's anguish from across the room. And something else. He looked over at the bundle on the floor as Ray shouted, "You fucking slut! What have you done?"

It was the blond man, hands and legs trussed with duct tape, a piece across his mouth, looking up at Ray, radiating terror. The old man could see dark splotches across the blond man's clothes and face that he realized were blood.

Ray completely ignored the old man. "Betty!" he screamed. She appeared at the hallway across the room in a long nightshirt. At first she saw only Ray, and then she noticed the blond man lying on the floor. She ran to him.

"What in the hell have you done, Ray?"

"Did you think you could get away with this?" Ray hissed. "You're fucking him, aren't you?" he said. "That's all I want to know, are you fucking him?"

Betty touched the blood on the blond man's face. "Oh, Sean," she cried, and then turned to Ray. "He's hurt, you bastard!" she said. "This is it, you asshole, this is it."

But Ray reached out and yanked her away from Sean by the scruff of her nightshirt, flinging her sprawling back into the hall-

way. "I don't know how you thought you would get away with this," he said, almost calmly, and he reached down to his gun, unbuckling his holster "What do you think this would do to me, huh? Did you think of that, you slut? What about Jessie? No daughter of mine—"

And then the old man, who had come up silently behind Ray, pressed his walkingstick diagonally into Ray's back and forced him forward into the wall "What the fuck?" Ray said as the pistol dropped from his fingers "I'm going to kill you, you fucking freak!" But try as he might, he could do no more than scrabble against the wall with his arms. The old man held him solidly against the wall with as little effort as a heavy steel hydraulic crane.

For a minute, there was no sound except Ray's increasingly frantic movements and declarations. But through the hand pressed into Ray's back the full strength of the trooper's disorder struck out at the old man. The trooper's anger spilled over him, and with it memories of whippings and name calling. "Stop crying, you pussy," Ray's father said. "You'll never measure up," "You spineless little shit!" And below these memories, the old man felt, for a moment, into the fractal world of Ray's mind, innumerable branches of neuronal dendrites rising about him like an immense jungle Jagged sheets of electric lightning thoughts cascaded across the tangled landscape, the shrunken organs at the center trying and failing to tame the raging storm.

The old man almost pulled away. It was too much. Ray's mind was broken, had been from the beginning. *I can't,* the old man protested.

Ray sensed the slight lessening of pressure and tried to squirm out, swearing, from beneath the stick. But the old man clamped down again He knew what he needed to do. And for the first time in a long time, tears flowed down his skeletal cheeks For once, he did not need to look to his Memory Book Taking a deep breath old man began whispering to Ray, telling him stories of the old man's own childhood, of the experiences of a child whose mind did not struggle

HE TOLD RAY OF HAPPY TIMES leaping into the swimming hole with his friends, of his mother reading stories late at night, of the wonder of stars so far away on a moonless night, of long talks with his uncle in the early morning with everyone else asleep, and more. … Like bright dust, the old man's most precious possessions floated from his mouth into the space between Ray and himself, sparking the room around them with an aurora borealis of colors before burying themselves in the trooper's body

Slowly, he felt the tension leave Ray's body, sensed shifts deep inside Ray's mind as uncountable connections rewired themselves, as organs swelled with new life.

Too soon, the lights of memories ceased to flow. The old man fell silent, emptied Almost absently, he released Ray, who crumpled onto the floor, all his anger spent, quietly sobbing to himself Still, the old man remained there for a moment as the final backwash of his memories left him behind, leaving him only with the memory of having memories, the knowledge that he had come from somewhere that he no longer knew At the same time, he felt strangely light, as if he had let go of an enormous anvil of weight that he had not realized he was carrying. He felt, somehow, *free.*

He looked down and saw Ray before him in a heap, then over to one side where Betty had crawled over to blond-headed Sean. She held her face close to Sean's, whispering as she frantically tried to unwrap the tape from his hands. The old man stepped over to them and kneeled down, placing a hand reassuringly on Betty's arm. She relaxed a little, looking over at Ray's collapsed form, then glanced up at the old man questioningly. A look of astonishment spread over her face, and she reached up to run her fingers lightly across his face "What have you done to yourself?" she whispered

The old man did not know how to answer He pointed to Ray and pressed his hands down, palm open. "Is he safe now?" Betty asked, and the old man nodded. "Thank you," she said But before turning back to Sean, she gazed at the old man for a moment. "Look to yourself, old man," she said "You have changed as well."

As the old man stood, Jessie came tentatively into the living room from the hallway. "It's OK, now, Sweetheart," Betty said, as she finally released Sean's hands from the tape Then Betty looked up, from Jessie to Ray and back again. "Go to your father, Jessie," Betty said softly "I think he needs you now."

Jessie stood uncertain for a moment Then, she moved slowly toward Ray.

THE OLD MAN TURNED AWAY from them He walked down the hallway into the bathroom and turned on the light. He looked into the mirror and a stranger's face looked back at him. No longer did his skin cling to his skull like Saran Wrap; it had filled out and softened. He looked down at his hands. They were no longer spindly, now thick with flesh. His age had sloughed away from him. *I am cut loose in time,* he thought He had let go of his anchor in the past With a newly clear, deep voice, he laughed in amazement

After a while, he returned to the living room, the lights now on, outside still dark. Sean sat on the couch wiping his face with a towel. Ray stood limply in the broken doorway, facing Betty but not looking at her Jessie held his hand. "I … I'm sorry," Ray finally said. "I … don't know what I can say...."

"Don't say anything, Ray," Betty said angrily Then she looked behind her at the man, no longer old, and then at Ray again. More softly, she said, "Ray, I think it's going to be OK now. But you need to go."

Ray glanced at Sean and back to her. Then he whispered, "Can I still see Jessie?"

Betty was silent for a while, gazing at her daughter Slowly, she nodded her head. Then she turned abruptly away from Ray and went to Sean on the couch

Ray turned to Jessie "I have to go now," he said. He kissed her on the forehead. "Take care of your mother now."

He turned and walked into darkness. A little later, headlights lit up the road as he drove away.

The man just stood there, watching them, breathing the cool morning air that smelled of dew and dust as it wafted through the open door Finally, he walked over to the couch and retrieved his pack and his black hat and suit jacket from down by Sean's feet. Then he stood before Betty and Sean. He mused walking away with loose-limbed motions

Betty surprised him by standing up and grabbing him in an enormous hug. Then she let him go The man gave her one of his broad smiles and tipped his hat to her and to Sean, who sat confused and quiet on the couch.

He turned to go, but a small hand grabbed him Jessie gazed up at him "Thank you for my daddy, man," the little girl said solemnly. She held out something to him and he reached out to find he was holding a small, white, stuffed kitten "Princess will keep you company," Jessie said, looking at him sadly

He stuck his tongue out at her, and she let out a little laugh in surprise.

It was enough

Later that day, as he strode smoothly along a road with no name that he knew, he stopped for a moment and regarded his walking stick It was an old man's thing. He did not need it anymore. Lifting it high above his head, he hurled it away from him, spinning it like a wheel arcing into the sky.

Reaching, then, into one pocket of his suit jacket, he felt the fur of his white kitten and smiled He would capture his time with Betty and Jessie and Ray in his book, by and by But not now. Not today. Today was for walking. The road behind him no longer held him in its sway And the road before him, smooth as a ribbon, stretched out to the curve of the horizon, calling him forward To what? He did not know ❧

Tony DiTerlizzi: Romancing the Book

Hearkening back to the days of early twentieth century illustrators, Tony DiTerlizzi crafts endearing works of the fantastic.

"The illustrator's job is to show what's between the lines," says award-winning artist/author Tony DiTerlizzi. And what Tony finds between the lines might literally contain eye of newt, toe of frog, and nose of bat.

His illustrations combine his deep affection for the tradition of pen and ink illustration and his fascination with nature, spiced by a lively sense of surreal humor. His goblins in *The Spiderwick Chronicles* look like amphibious wombats. His leaf-horned elf looks as much vegetable as animal. And a shape-shifting character, Phooka, seems to be a direct descendant of Tenniel's Cheshire Cat and Neill's Cowardly Lion.

"It's a fine line between too cute and too scary," Tony says. "And I try to balance carefully."

Recipient of the 2003 Caldecott Honor Book award for his unique interpretation of the classic Mary Howitt poem, *The Spider and The Fly*, and now the co-author and artist of the New York Times bestselling five-book serial, *The Spiderwick Chronicles*, Tony has hit upon a reader and critic-pleasing stylistic balance between good and evil, adorable and frightening. Tony's expressive line drawings recall the illustrations of great fantasy artists from the early twentieth century and even earlier, yet have a contemporary spin.

"My real heroes are all dead," he says cheerfully. "I love the work of turn-of-the-century artists who painted fantasy, Joseph Leyendecker, Arthur Rackham, and those who came later, Norman Rockwell, Edward Gorey, Charles Addams, to name just a few. I'm not a big fan of a lot of contemporary art—although there are some exceptions that amaze me. Blow me away. Obviously Brian Froud is one of them. It was when I began to research his influences that I got turned on to the earlier artists."

By Karen Haber

Tony has been described as painting "like a very, very twisted Norman Rockwell." He even has an homage to the artist on his web site, a parody of a famous Rockwell painting of the artist at his easel with an admiring audience. But here the artist is Tony, and the audience is a big pink phantasm.

With his co-author and good friend Holly Black, he has created a publishing juggernaut in *The Spiderwick Chronicles*. Serialized into five books, *Spiderwick* follows the adventures of the three Grace siblings, Mallory, Jared, and Simon, who have moved with their mother to their great-aunt's house, discovered a mysterious book written by a former resident, and encountered several peculiar denizens of Faery with whom they must cope in addition to the regular trials and tribulations of modern life. Tony is currently working on *Arthur Spiderwick's Field Guide to the Fantastical World Around You*, scheduled for publication in late 2005.

For *Spiderwick*, Tony functioned not only as artist and co-writer, but also as art director. "It's a real labor of love—looking at the book as a whole, "the" artform. Which means park your ego at the door."

"We wanted it to reek of the classic fairy tale stuff. I brought in all of these turn of the century fairy tale books: Arthur Rackham, *Peter Pan in Kensington Garden*. I said, 'I want it to look like this. How can we do it with modern technology and not outpace the readers?' I wanted the kids to be able to afford it. So we came up with some great creative solutions. For example, we couldn't get them leather-bound, so we scanned the leather texture in."

"Timelessness was a big consideration. These old fairy tale books still endure. We wanted *Spiderwick* to be on the bookshelf next to *Peter Pan* and *Robin Hood* and *The Hobbit*."

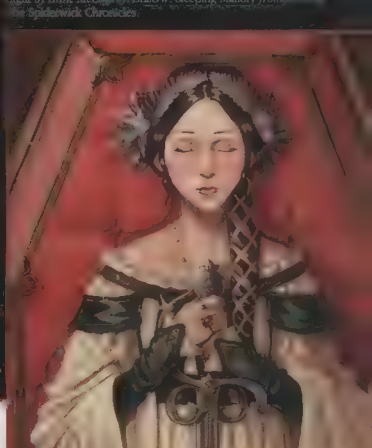
DiTerlizzi and Black have succeeded in combining the vintage look of old children's books with a contemporary, edgy sensibility that engages both young readers and adults.

"There are so many considerations," Tony says. "How do we make the kids look like real kids but not too trendy? And we're competing with movies, video games, all the other stuff that occupies kids' free time. The books can't be candy-coated. The goblins and faeries need to appear plausible. Intimidating yet sort of Muppety Weird. Then I have to be aware of when weird becomes scary."

"We wanted the folklore to support this, not to diverge into pink-and-purple sequinned faeries. And that folklore runs on its own set of morals. It's very human, very complicated, and it's not all sweet. It's like an animal kingdom of Faery. Some are beautiful. Some are scary. Some are intriguing and funny. A book with a lot of good lightness needs some good darkness as well."

Tony has been a fan of old fashioned illustration for a long time. After an idyllic childhood in South Florida during which his artistic skills were revealed early and heartily encouraged—he was a master of origami before he could read—he practiced and perfected his skills at the Florida School of Arts, and The Art Institute of Fort Lauderdale, where he earned a graphic design degree in 1992.

OPPOSITE LEFT: Twilight Traveler *from* Dragon *magazine*; *OPPOSITE RIGHT:* Jared and Hogsqueal *from the book* The Spiderwick Chronicles; *OPPOSITE BOTTOM:* The Littlest Artist *from* Dragon *magazine*; *LEFT:* Lessa and Ramoth *from the book* Dragonflight *by Anne McCaffrey*; *BELOW:* Sleeping Mallory *from the book* The Spiderwick Chronicles.



During the 1990s he freelanced as an illustrator for TSR's *Dungeons & Dragons*, *Planescape*, *Changeling*, and *Magic the Gathering*, where he gained a following among fans of fantasy art. Happily, they've followed him right into the world of children's picture books. The first book Tony wrote and illustrated, *Jimmy Zangwow's Out Of This World Moon Pie Adventure* received critical acclaim, as did his second effort, *TED*, which garnered the 2002 Zena Sutherland Award.

Tony also illustrated the *Alien & Possum* series by Tony Johnston, *Ribbiting Tales*, and *Once Upon a Fairy Tale*, whose proceeds benefit Steven Spielberg's Starbright Foundation. His work also was seen on the covers of books by J.R.R. Tolkien, Anne McCaffrey, Greg Bear, and Peter Beagle.

When he took on *The Spider and the Fly* he never dreamed it would win the Caldecott Award. He did, however, expect people to react strongly to his uniquely stylized interpretation of Mary Howitt's classic 18th-century cautionary poem. "I thought that people would be very polarized. To my complete surprise, they loved it. And I loved that people were responding so strongly to a book, and a picture book at that.

"When I first saw the book proposal, I thought: It's too bad that Edward Gorey isn't here to do it. I saw the potential for such black humor in it. Charles Addams was an inspiration, and (filmmaker) Tim Burton. Originally we considered doing it in sepia to give it a vintage feel. But I realized that it had to be black and white, that it kind of had that spooky monster movie aspect.

"For the Spider, I began thinking about all these great dastardly villains. I saw him as immaculate. He's not dirty, he's clean, refined, a gentleman. A refined villain. Hannibal Lecter, as a Victorian Spider.

"I wanted there to be lots of details that kids could discover with their parents. I even did a bunch of gag pages—what can you do with bugs—to use as little bits of detail. A good picture book should have a series of great images, not just one mind-blowing image. And you should be able to come back to it again and again, to see something new."

Both *Spiderwick* and *The Spider and the Fly* have sold to Hollywood. Tony is pleased about the sales, but for him the book's the thing. "How Holly and I feel about movies is that we make books. Books are our chosen medium. Other people make movies. I think even the kids know that movies and books are two different things.

"I don't want to make movies—I could have, but I want to communicate this way. I'm doing what I really, really love. I think books will endure over these other things. The reader participates in books, whereas with movies, which I really enjoy, everything is done for you in terms of imagination.

"As a child, I liked fantasy that seemed more steeped in reality. I think that's why myths persist --because they might be plausible. Take a look at dinosaur bones, or alligators, and then think of dragons."

Keeping that in mind, Tony says "The core of *The Field Guide* has a lot of mythological and crypto-zoological underpinning. I've always had an obsession with natural history and nature. The trick

RIGHT Goblin War buggy *from* Magic The Gathering *BELOW* Mulgarath the Ogre *from the book* The Spiderwick Chronicles Book V The Wrath of Mulgarath *OPPOSITE TOP* Song of Serenity *from* Magic The Gathering *OPPOSITE BOTTOM* Siren Gal *from The DiTerlizzi Gals portfolio*

is, how do you put the creatures together?"

The Field Guide will feature portraits and descriptions of the fantastic denizens of the *Spiderwick* universe in a large-format treatment that will echo John James Audubon's *The Birds of America*.

Once *The Field Guide* is finished, Tony is planning on doing a picture book, and then a short children's book similar in length to *The Spiderwick Chronicles*. "It won't be *Spiderwick*," he says. "I don't like the safety of continuing doing the same kind of thing. So I'll be doing stuff that's really different from *Spiderwick* for a while to refresh."

Like many artists, Tony remembers his own early struggles to enter the field, and he has provided a generous segment on illustrating tips on his engaging Web site (www.diterlizzi.com). What's more, he will respond to young artists who send him their work for critique.

"I was fortunate enough to get feedback and support early in my career from people like Brian Froud, William Stout, and Michael Kaluta. So I know firsthand how important it is to give a response. It's incredible to receive that kind of affirmation from someone you admire. I'll never forget that. So I feel I have to do it. And it's so cool when you see somebody you talked to or encouraged becomes a professional artist and you see his or her work in the field. It's so gratifying."

Tony is equally enthusiastic about his encounters with fans, at Gen Con, during a book signing, or via e-mail. "I'm always very interested in hearing from fans—what they want to see more or less of. I'm really glad that the gamers are following me into *Spiderwick*. I didn't know if they would."

If he could illustrate any of the classic children's fantasy books, which ones would he choose? "I would love to do *Alice in Wonderland*, although everybody does. For me, the end-all and be-all would be to do the *Winnie The Pooh* books."

Tony will get to enjoy a fragment of that dream when he depicts a scene from *The House at Pooh Corner* for the "Reading Is Fundamental" series 40th anniversary volume in which various illustrators offer their takes on fantasy favorites that inspired them.

"I love old-fashioned picture books and illustration," Tony says. "Not a lot of people are keeping that alive. But the kids obviously respond to it. I really love that classic style. I think it can be done, just make it a little more relevant. I just wish more people made those kind of books."

"I'm such a huge fan of really really good pen and ink. There aren't a lot of people keeping it alive. After the success of *Spiderwick*, I'm hoping that maybe other publishers will get interested. I think you can do Tenniel-style art today."

You certainly can if you're Tony DiTerlizzi.

ARNORA CLUTCHED THE TRUNK OF THE FIR TREE AND TREMBLED AS THE southerners and her own people's warriors screamed at each other in the field below. Perched where two thick branches joined the trunk, she pressed her cheek against the sap-sticky bark and looked for Gudmund's long yellow braid while the two groups stood, separated by an open strip like a broad green river, their swords raised, shaking their shields. Their cries were as harsh as those of crows.

The late-summer afternoon sky had darkened unexpectedly, but she could see well enough to know that her trances had been right. All her people's preparations would not help them avoid their fate.

Suddenly the southerners rushed across the green river and fell on Arnora's brother, Thorkel, the king of all the lands west to the peninsula, and on the other warriors who had come from their farms to defend against the voyagers from the south. The invaders were like a rush of dark rats, with their bristling beards and their brown clothing. Only they were rats with swords. If Arnora's people—if her people's men—did not defeat them, the newcomers, hungry for land, would swarm over the forests straight through to the sea.

Watching them, hearing the bellows and the ugly sound of metal thudding into flesh, Arnora did not doubt it. But that no longer concerned her. Nor did the fate of her brother. She looked only for Gudmund, and when her eyes found his tall beautiful back and sun-colored hair, they stayed on him. She could not change his destiny. And though she would avenge him and her brother if she were a man, she was not. But at least she would never leave him. Gudmund was *her* fate. She vowed it.

She prayed for help.

The wind rose, as if it were going to storm, and the fir swayed, the waving branches making it harder for her to see.

Below, spears in hand, the southerners pressed Arnora's brother and his fellow warriors. Gudmund fought to Thorkel's left. Arnora could see their swords rise and fall almost in unison, as if they were threshing grain together.

A sound came to her with the wind, a groan or a shriek, she wasn't sure which. She could hear it beyond the screams from the field below.

Stones in Winter

BY KAREN D. FISHLER • ILLUSTRATION BY ERIC DESCHAMPS

Gudmund staggered backward, his shield raised—two of the enemy rushed at him and hacked at him. Arnora gasped.

Then the great sound intensified. Immediately the forest was filled with Others, rushing through the air between the tree trunks. Their horses flew without wings. Arnora whimpered and covered her ears to blot out the sound, but it was the sound of all battles, everywhere, all happening now, and the Others—the women who rode these horses—made her cower, terrified.

Not even in her trances had she ever seen such a thing. She knew it was the end. Her people were lost.

Most important of all, Gudmund would die. One of the Others, the Valkyries, would sweep him up, throw him across her saddle, and take him away into the sky. He would rise each morning and feast, fight the rest of the day, be killed by some other warrior, and sleep the night in death. Then he would rise again as if no sword had ever pierced him.

She remembered him riding behind her on his horse, felt the tall warm bulk of him pressing into her back as the two of them galloped, laughing, along the cliffs above the surf. He had taken her on the rocky soil there, the air full of salt, the wind helping him to peel her clothing off. He had unbraided his hair, and hers, and the yellow and the auburn had mingled in the sunlight.

No. She would never leave him.

"No!" she repeated, screaming it this time, into the gale. She stood up on her perch and waited, the great sound filling her mind, her whole body, and jumped onto one of the horses, behind the woman who rode it. She clasped the Valkyrie's neck, where there was no armor, and her waist, where the breastplate ended.

The woman struck backward at her. The blows could not have hurt more if the horse itself had kicked her. But Arnora let them come, as the horse surged through the air, riding out over the battle.

All around them galloped the other horses. Their riders' faces blazed with fury, and their hair streamed out from under their helmets. The hair of the woman Arnora rode behind enveloped her like fire.

She looked down. The horses wheeled about in the air as if they were a flock of crows. The great circle they made took them over the point of contact, where Arnora's people struggled against the southerners. The line between the two armies moved constantly, like the line where the sea meets the sands. The men, enveloped in their own violence, seemed unaware of what was above them. A hulking southerner, his forearms vambraced in gleaming bronze, hacked at Thorkel, who collapsed sideways. Gudmund was down now, on one knee, almost falling over backward. He slashed upward with his sword as the same bronze wristed southerner stabbed at him with a short spear. The horses rushed over him, and Arnora saw his eyes flick upward as if he had heard something.

Thunder poured down from the sky, and lightning crackled around the horses' bodies. The women screamed, their piercing voices mingling with the rage of the men on the ground.

Again the horses wheeled about. The Valkyrie Arnora clutched banged backward with her helmeted head in a vicious blow, and blood suddenly slipped down Arnora's face. Her vision grew red. A fiery pain came in her right thigh, and then the woman's knife stabbed her leg again. More pain.

ARNORA GRIPPED AS HARD AS SHE COULD. She knew she would fall off if she tried to get the knife away. *I am going to die too,* she thought, and hoped that, when Gudmund's time came, it would be the horse she rode that would stoop over his body, so she could be near it for just a moment. She held on. The horses rushed down the airs as if they galloped down a mountain slope, while the roar of the battle was like the sound of the surf when Arnora and Gudmund joined their bodies on that sunlit day, a lifetime ago.

As they approached the meeting point between the two armies, the southerner's arm raised one last time and he drove his spear down through Gudmund's chest, so hard that it pierced the ground and pinned him so he could not move. Arnora saw it happen through the whipping strands of the woman's hair. She screamed as loudly as the Valkyrie did.

Gudmund thrashed, thrashed again, then stopped moving.

At that moment, the Valkyries' horses settled on the field of battle. Arnora's was not far from Gudmund. The woman leaned down—Thorkel lay on the ground, his head almost severed—and as if he weighed no more than a small cat, pulled his body up onto her saddle. Arnora blinked her eyes to understand … her brother was whole and lying face down over the horse's neck, yet there he was on the grass, maimed, blood still spreading out from the wound. He was as motionless across the saddle as he was on the ground.

Thunder seemed everywhere now. The sky was breaking apart.

The Valkynes did not take everyone, Arnora knew that, only the bravest. Would they take Gudmund? She blinked, fighting to see through the blood in her eyes. She could not loosen her grip, for if he was elected and she stayed behind, she would never see him again.

And he *was* elected. One of the women nearby had reached down for him. There was his beautiful body being lifted up, his eyes closed as if in sleep.

Arnora started to cry angry tears. They washed some of the blood away, so she could see as well as feel the whole herd of horses climbing, their long legs surging without end, galloping up, up, into the thunder and the darkness, into death.

Even if I die, she thought, *I will not let go.*

The Valkynes rode into the great hall as a pink and gold dawn broke, their horses heaving and shuddering. The doors, so tall that a cloudy mist clung to their massive wooden planks, had been thrown open as they approached.

Throwing down their spears, the Valkynes slipped off the horses and pulled the sleeping warriors down. Arnora watched, exhausted, as Gudmund was put face up onto a stone slab like a bed. One of the other Valkynes came and took Arnora's brother.

But the woman Arnora was riding behind sat still.

"Remove yourself, mortal," she said, her voice a boom in the vast space.

Arnora slowly unclasped her arms from around the Valkyrie's neck and waist. She wasn't sure she would be able to move, she was so stiff. And her leg … would she be able to walk? Her head pounded and she felt dizzy.

The Valkyrie jumped down, reached up a hand to grab Arnora's hair, and pulled her off the horse to the floor. The horse stamped beside her, making her flinch, then was led away with the others. Arnora lay shuddering, in too much pain even to scream.

Two of the women reached down and grabbed her arms, then pulled her, whimpering, along the floor to a bench, where they propped her in a sitting position.

"Why are you here, mortal?"

Arnora tried to look at their faces, but each glance could last only a tiny moment. There was too much in them; the power pushed her away. Each face was like a storm, like a strike of lightning, or an avalanche. Then she thought of Gudmund and gritted her teeth.

"I followed Gudmund," she said. "He was my intended. I knew that he would die in battle. My brother also was killed. If Gudmund is gone, I do not wish to live, only to be his companion in the afterlife."

The Valkynes laughed. Arnora felt as if she were being pierced with needles.

"Which is he?" one of them said. "They have no names here."

Arnora somehow got to her feet and staggered, limping, down the hall. Her right leg would not bear her full weight, and she wept from the pain.

As she made her way down the rows of bodies, golden sun began to seep in, warming the air. She smelled bread and the fermented-honey odor of mead, both also warm, and the faint tinge in the back of her nose of salted fish. Meat was being stewed somewhere. But where? The hall was so big she could only see that its faraway walls were made of thousands of spears, their wooden shafts gleaming in the distance and rising to the ceiling, as high as a low-lying cloud. Gold covered the distant surface above her, and wooden staves arced it. Only the great carved wooden columns, so huge it would take three of her to clasp hands around one of them, were within reach. Such an enormous place. *How many battles had there been?* she wondered. *How many men had fallen, over how many years?* Only men. There were no women here—no mortals, at least. They were left behind, to feel as she felt about Gudmund.

She passed man after man, rank after rank, southerners as well as her own people, and men from elsewhere, too. At Thorkel's body she paused and bowed her head, remembering that the same man had killed both him and Gudmund, wishing again that things had been otherwise and she could have avenged them. Then she shuffled on until she reached her lover. The Valkyries closed

around her, watching

Her hand reached out, trembling. She was still crying, but partly from joy now.

"I would touch him," she said in a whisper.

"Do not wake him," said one of the women. "They sleep for a day and a night when they first arrive."

"Besides," said another. "He is not as you remember." And they laughed again.

Arnora dried her tears.

"I know," she said. "He has died."

She touched his face, and pulled her hand back again—his cheek was cold, so much colder than she had thought it would be, like a stone touched in a dry winter. Yet still soft, as flesh should be. She shuddered. Then she touched him again and bent over, groaning with the effort to move, to kiss his lips.

"Enough," said one of the Valkyries. "He is ours now."

She grabbed Arnora, her grip as hard as if her hands were made of metal, and dragged her deeper into the hall, to the center, where tree-sized logs lay heaped in a great fire pit, ready to be lit. The Valkyrie threw her onto another bench.

THEY SURROUNDED HER and stared down at her. Arnora took one glance and then clapped her face, shaking.

"Throw her back down to the earth where she belongs," one of them said, her voice a fiery crackle.

"She will be killed," said another. Was it the one who had borne Arnora on her back?

"As well she should be," said a third.

"It cannot be right to kill me," Arnora said, her voice very small. She tried to speak louder. "I belong here."

Laughter. It hurt her even more now.

"You are alive, mortal, and no warrior."

"But it is my fate to be with Gudmund," she insisted. She glanced up to make certain they knew she meant what she said, but looked away immediately, unable to meet their eyes.

"Fate?" one of the Valkyries said wrathfully. "You dare to speak of fate to *us*?"

Eyes on the floor, Arnora saw one of them advance, her strapped and thonged feet halting several steps away.

Arnora's body shook uncontrollably, as if all the blood had gone out of her arms and legs and she were trembling from cold. The blood on her thigh had caked, and the flesh had swollen hornbly. Her eyelids fluttered with fear, but somehow she forced herself to look up, to meet the Valkyrie's gaze. And then, breathing hard, she pushed herself to her feet.

"None on the battlefield saw you, unless it was at the moment of their death," she said. She made her hands into fists to keep herself from collapsing in terror and hiding her face. "Only I saw you. In trances days ago I saw the enemy approach and told my brother, the king, so that the warriors could be ready. And then when the battle came, I saw you riding through the air. It is because of my trances that I was able to see you. And because of Gudmund. Because I am meant to stay with him. I welcome this fate."

She looked at the other Valkyries. Her chest was heaving with the effort to meet their eyes, so great was the pressure to supplicate herself.

Another of the women, her hair dark like a full-leafed tree against the moon, gave a short laugh.

"It is good of you to welcome your fate, mortal. But fate is what it is, whether you welcome it or not."

"And my seeing you, my being here, is what is," said Arnora.

"We deal out fate!" shouted another woman. "Mortals cannot change that!"

Arnora covered her ears and cowered, unable to stop herself. But then she stood up again.

"If my fate was to stay on the earth and die alone, then I did change it," she said. Her gaze was stronger now, but she still shook, as if a sword were suspended over her, ready to strike.

"You have not changed it yet, mortal," said the woman who had carried Arnora here. She had said little so far, but now the others fell back as she stepped forward and stalked around the bench where Arnora stood.

"We who scoff at you have fate to rule us as well," she added. The other Valkyries murmured, a sound like distant thunder before a spring storm. "We may not bring ordinary mortals here, only warriors. That is our purpose and our fate: to prepare for the battle at the end of time. Warriors—only warriors—will live in this hall."

"But I must stay with Gudmund," said Arnora desperately.

"Gudmund, Gudmund!" said the dark-haired Valkyrie who had threatened her before. "All this talk of love! What of your family? Your brother is here as well, is he not? I know your king was chosen. Enough of sighing over love. What of vengeance?"

Arnora looked at their faces, the faces of death and rage and revenge, and thought about fate. The energy had started to leave her again. She began to sag, not from fear, but because she was so tired.

"Give me a sword," she said. "I will become a warrior and avenge them both."

They laughed again, howls of derision, as the men slept around them. The sunlight was growing stronger.

"Men unmate in fear on the battlefield, mortal," said the one who kept threatening her. "You will not fight. You will run."

"No. I will fight," said Arnora.

"And even if you fight, you will fight like a coward, seeking the easy prey, the wounded, the small." The Valkyrie folded her arms and smiled.

"No," Arnora said. "My brother is brave—was brave—and I will be, too."

All the Valkyries were laughing now, except for the one who had carried her here, who said nothing. The dark-haired one who had taunted Arnora dragged her down the length of the hall to the doors, followed by the other Valkyries.

A horse waited outside. They put her up on the saddle and tied her waist to the horse's neck and her feet to each other under his belly. They bound her hands to the reins with strips of leather.

"Go back to the land of mortals, woman," said the dark-haired Valkyrie. "If you survive the journey, get yourself a husband and live the miserable life you were meant for."

The one who had carried Arnora held the horse's muzzle and whispered in its ear.

"I will avenge Gudmund and you will welcome me here," said Arnora.

But she was pretending, and the Valkyries knew it. They only laughed and slapped the horse's rump, and it galloped away toward the rising sun.

She was glad, in the end, that they had tied her to the horse. It ran down through the clouds, and the hours passed, as they had when the Valkyries had flown home to the great hall. Stunned, she saw the mountains, vast and far away from where her people lived, rush by her, their coldness freezing her. Goats clambered on the rocks halfway up the peaks. With no one to hold onto, Arnora felt dizzy and sick as the horse galloped down farther, toward sloping dark forests that she finally recognized, and the sun began to fall. She clung to the horse's mane, telling herself that what birds looked at, she could look at as well.

Finally the horse flew close above the trees and made a great circle above the battlefield. Near one end, bodies lay slumped in a heap. No one else was there, but fires flickered near where the trees began, beyond where the dead had been piled.

Dusk had already fallen now, a day after the battle had raged. The moon was full above her head.

She tried to make the horse stop, but it paid no attention to her pulling, and galloped on in the airs above the forest. When it slowed and cantered down to the ground, it was to a small, flat opening between the trees near the battlefield.

Her leather bonds loosened and fell off by themselves The horse stood like a statue, but she could feel it thrum with energy. Frozen colder by the wind than she had ever felt *Gudmund, in death, could feel no colder than this,* she thought—she slid off its back and collapsed on the ground.

Then the great horse reared, whunnied loudly, and sprang into the air, right over Arnora's head. She pressed herself to the earth as it galloped upward, into the sky. The moon shone on its coat. It disappeared.

She lay there for a while, so cold she could not move, smelling in the night air the faintest hint of salt from the sea. She thought of staying there until the life left her, remembering Gudmund and their ride above the sunlit, crashing waves. But finally, lifting herself to her hands and knees, her leg throbbing from the stab wounds, she made herself begin to crawl.

Men paced around the fires at the rim of the forest, just outside the trees The battlefield lay beyond them. The moon had set by now, and the men—all the warriors that had survived of Arnora's people—waited

So did Arnora

SHE WAS STILL COLD, and the clothes she wore now were no warmer than her own: breeches and a tunic, a mail overshirt, and a short cloak. Crawling in the dark down through the trees and across an open place to the pile of dead men, she had felt at the stiff limbs at the outside of the heap, trying not to think about the fact that Gudmund and Thorkel's earthly bodies lay somewhere in this mound of dead flesh. A dog, intent on its meal a few feet away, ignored her Finally she found a body that seemed not too tall, and pulled the clothes from him as quietly as she could, trying to keep his mail shirt and his shield and weapons from clanking together Then came the slow crawl back up into the trees. Once there, she had rolled up the ankles of the breeches to make them shorter and tied the leather straps from the Valkyries' horse around her waist to keep them on.

As important as the clothing and the mail, the man had a flask of water and a piece of dried meat in his pouch She had drunk what the flask held, then refilled it from a stream on the way back to this hiding place near the meadow's border She gnawed the meat as if she were the dog tugging at the warriors' bodies with his teeth

Then she had fallen asleep, though bugs crawled in the breeches, making her scratch and twitch and giving her bad dreams

Now she stared down between the tree trunks, the spiraled hilt of the dead man's sword clutched in her hand. His knife was stuck in the leather strip around her waist. She had decided to leave the shield behind The sword was so heavy she would need both hands to swing it

She made her way slowly down the slope to be closer to the edge of the forest, creeping quietly between the trees so as not to be seen. The men all knew her If they recognized her, they would turn her away

Here was the fir tree she had watched from, one and a half days before

Her breath plumed out pale in the cold darkness She waited.

Finally there was the tiniest movement across the gray of the field, and then more movement, and then suddenly her brother's warriors were snuffing out their fires and forming themselves into rows—it was sad how few of them there were—and now they ran, out onto the dark grassy space to have their encounter with the southerners, who had come back to try to finish them off. Arnora staggered up out of the bushes and ran too, limping, trying desperately to keep up. There were hillocks in the field, and she tripped and fell She couldn't breathe. But someone had picked her up again—one of her brother's men, and it seemed it was too dark for him to recognize her—and she limped onward, half hopping, half-running. There was no pause this time, no screaming and posturing with weapons The two sides rushed at each other, hacking

All she could hear was grunting and roars from the men, horrible crunches and moans. She struggled to know which direction to go in. Someone screamed nearby.

The light was growing now, and finally she could see a little bit, but the men were taller than she was, so there was no hope of seeing over them. She tried to look between them, but that was no good either

She pushed through a space and there was one of the southerners, his mouth agape in a scream, staring at her He raised a mace, and in a terrified instinct she pulled the knife out of her waist and thrust it at his face The mace fell out of his hand, and she pulled the knife away and stuck it into him again, into his neck this time. He made a gurgling sound and fell sideways, putting his hand out to the ground to support himself Blood flooded out over his shoulder. Arnora could smell the salty warmth. She dropped the knife and picked up the sword with both hands. She hacked at him with it as if she were chopping wood, and finally he collapsed onto the ground She gasped with the effort.

Someone pushed her, and there was a roaring sound—the southerners shouting, she thought as she fell, or maybe something more. Someone toppled onto her. The scent of the earth, dank like death itself, rose around her, and she inhaled the sweat of the man who crushed her. She lay there, thankful not to be able to move. She thought, *I will stay here I did my best, and this is all I can do.*

But then she remembered. It was not enough to fight She had to fight well. She had to get up and fight the way a warrior would fight. If she did not, Gudmund was gone from her forever

It took her four tries to shove the body off. She struggled to her feet The wound in her leg was just a throb in the distance

All around her, clashing sounds made a kind of music, a horrible tune, and there were grunts and moans. Next to her a man she had met a few years before stared at her, astonished, recognizing her, and she turned away.

She looked for a strong enemy. The sounds of the men around her seemed to fade, and they writhed, grappling with each other and slashing with their weapons

The sky seemed to have turned red She heard thunder

To her left was a small group of her own people—three or four men that she recognized. Southerners surrounded them, pounding at their shields, flinging themselves at Thorkel's warriors. One of them, a huge man in the grip of his rage, had a vambrace of bronze wrapped around each forearm

Arnora screamed, her thirst and dry throat forgotten The men paused when they heard her voice, so much higher than theirs Perhaps, she thought with satisfaction, they thought she was a Valkyrie She screamed again, hearing a kind of echo from the sky, and ran at the southern chieftain, the sword feeling much lighter now, both her hands wrapped around its hilt.

Astonished to see a woman rushing at him, he bashed at her sword with his shield She staggered backward, then recovered her stance and hacked at him again He hit her on the side of her head with the flat of his sword, and suddenly she was down on her hands and knees, almost like the southerner she had killed a few moments before

Facing the ground, breathing hard and listening to the roar that seemed to come from the sky, she still could almost hear the chieftain raise his sword, ready to sweep her head off. She imagined his bronzed forearm gripping the hilt, the muscles flexing

A spear lay there on the ground, discarded by some other fighter, probably someone now dead.

She snatched it up and, bracing herself on one knee, thrust it upward into the chieftain's belly, just as she saw horses out of the corner of her eye. Horses in the sky

The chieftain tottered backward, and she somehow found her sword, somehow staggered to her feet holding it in both hands, somehow got to him, and in one stroke, as he was bringing up his shield again, she hacked his head half off, and he fell over back

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ward as if someone had thrown him to the earth

She turned to fight someone else, but the southerners were moving backward now. Thorkel's men began to run, chasing the invaders

And there were the Valkyries, their horses settling to the ground They began culling the dead, pulling their bodies up, as pink showed on the horizon.

Arnora looked for the one who had borne her before, but could not find her One that she did not recognize was gathering up the southern chieftain, lifting his massive body onto her saddle. Dragging the sword on the ground in her exhaustion, Arnora ran to her and pulled at the Valkyrie's arm

"Take me with you!" she cried. "I have proven myself! Look—this was my enemy, and I have avenged my family and my lover!"

The Valkyrie swatted her across the face, and she was smacked to the ground. She struggled to breathe

"I remember you, mortal," the woman said. "You are no concern of our-"

Gasping, Arnora regained her breath

"But I have fought," she said. "I killed that man. I was a warrior."

The Valkyrie looked down at her from her great height and said nothing. Now the others gathered, their horses throwing off power as they stamped close around her, the women's faces like doom above her Arnora's dark-haired tormenter was among them

"You live, mortal," she said. "We do not take the living."

"But you decide who lives and who dies," said Arnora.

The Valkyries laughed and, as before, their laughter was like stab wounds

"You told us you determined your fate," said one. "You should have determined to be killed."

They laughed again, and wheeled the horses about

Arnora struggled to her feet

"No!" she shouted "You must take me! Gudmund is waiting!"

The dark-haired Valkyrie returned and stopped her horse so close that his breath huffed in her face. His wild eyes made her stumble back

"Have a care, mortal," the Valkyrie said, "or we will take more notice of you than you would like."

The horse charged Arnora threw herself to the side to keep from being trampled, then got to her feet and ran after it. But all she could do was watch as the Valkyries rode up into the sky.

Thorkel's men were beginning to slow in the distance. The chase was failing

The danger now came from Arnora's own people. The sun was coming up. She did not know what her brother's warriors would do to her once the man who had recognized her told others that she had been fighting. She must run to where their fires had blazed, try to steal some food, then hide in the forest.

The southerners would be back

The morning passed slowly. Arnora had rifled through the bags around the deserted fires and found nothing but a few pieces of meat and some bread. She took a bit of it and fled to where she had left the water flask and her own clothes. Then she took everything higher up, near the top of the ridge, where the firs thickened.

Stumbling on a brake of lingonberry in a swampy depression next to a stream, she ate all she could find and drank more water Finally she crawled under the bushes and fell asleep, using her skirt as a blanket She tried to remember the smell of salt, the feeling of Gudmund's weight behind her on the horse, but exhaustion claimed her like death.

Thunder woke her up, but when she pushed her way out of the berry canes, the sky between the tall firs showed clear She whirled about, certain someone was watching her

Duff sifted down through the air in silence. She was alone

Then a crow streaked through the trees and landed on a log nearby. It cawed once and flapped off again

She suddenly realized that the sun would be setting soon. She had slept nearly the whole day. Thrusting her old clothes under the bushes again, she put her knife, rescued from the battleground, in her waist and put the helmet back on. She picked up the mail shirt to put it on, then set it down again

Then she took the sword and ran.

By the time she reached the forest's edge, the horizon beyond already blazed, and the trees around her had begun to darken. She stopped and crouched against a tree trunk, panting

They began culling the dead, pulling their bodies up, as pink showed on the horizon.

The southerners were already here, running backlit by the lowering sun, straight toward Thorkel's few remaining warriors in a wedge-shaped line. Their helmets looked like molten gold, and they screamed, their swords held up like lances

To her right, within shouting distance, stood the men of Arnora's people, Thorkel's warriors.

They hesitated. They had stamped out the fires and armed themselves, but stood in clusters, moving uneasily

They must attack, Arnora thought desperately, *why are they not attacking?*

She waited, but they did nothing

A WIND LIFTED HER HAIR and whipped it around her helmet She looked behind her, up the slope of the ridge to where the sky showed through the waving firs. There, opposite the sunset, inky clouds rolled down toward the battlefield

Distant thunder.

She lifted the sword in both hands and began to run out from the trees directly toward the southerners, and as she ran she screamed, a thin, piercing sound that floated over the roars of the approaching men.

And now there was sound behind her, a great sound of thunder and horses' hooves, and of men running, running to join her

The man at the point of the southerners' wedge swept his sword down at her, but she used both hands to make her own sword into a thin shield. He battered at her, making her stumble back, and the hand she had on the blade became slippery with blood.

Finally she backed up against some other man and used the traction to duck under the southerner's blow. She tried to knock him over, but he stood like a tree, and they grappled. He gripped her neck with one hand and shook her, growling something in her ear

Continued on page 89

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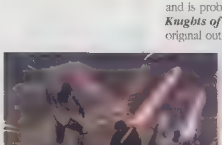
LUNA

By Eric T. Baker

Adventure titles for game fans of all stripes are in plentiful supply.

Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic is deservedly the second-best-selling Xbox game of all time and is probably one of the top 10 video games ever made. Now Microsoft has released ***Star Wars: Knights of the Old Republic II: the Sith Lords*** for the Xbox and PC. The sequel does not push the original out of the top ten, but it retains many of the things that made the first one great, adds a couple things that make it better than the first, and, unfortunately, includes some glitches that should have been cleaned up before the game was released.



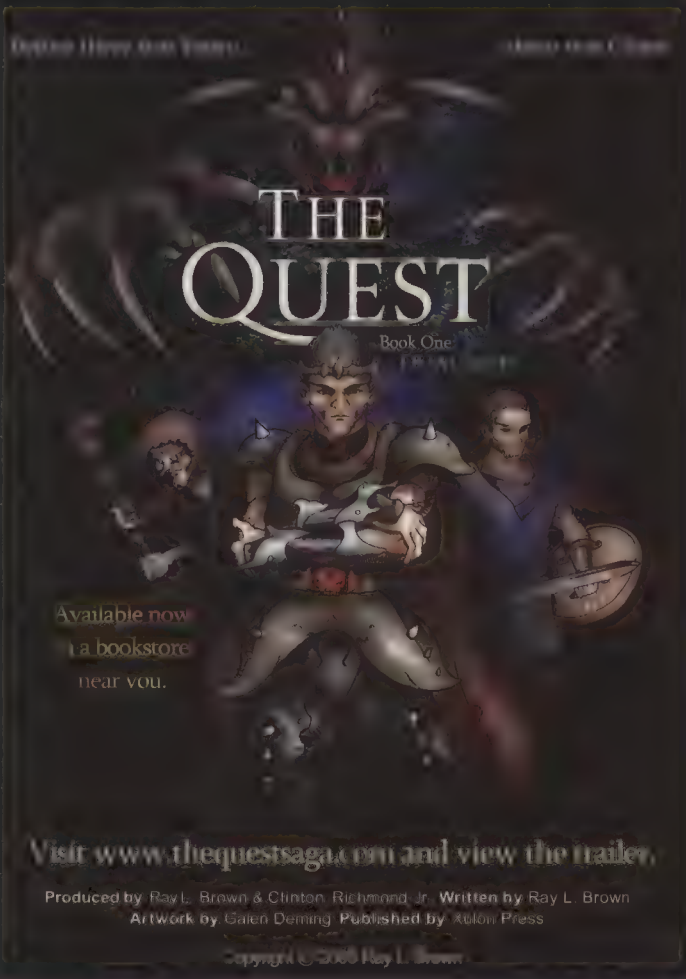
TOP: Pulse-pounding action in Knights of the Old Republic II: The Sith Lords. *ABOVE: Valve brings out the sequel to its highly acclaimed franchise game in* Half-Life 2.

The action of *KotOR2* picks up five years after the events of the first game. The player takes the role of a brand new hero, referred to by everyone in the game as "the exile." Some characters from the first game are seen in cameos and three return as members of the exile's party, but sadly none of those three is named Bastila or Mission. The Ebon Hawk is also back, which turns out to be a mixed blessing for the party. As in *KotOR*, the player's character has lost touch with the force and many of its memories. Recovering both is are big subplots in the game.

As before, most choices in the game have either a Dark Side or a Light Side option. The character's actions are tracked on scale to see if overall they are Light or Dark. What is different this time is that the main character can earn influence with the people in his party. This opens up new dialogue options and moves the party member's alignment toward the exile's. Playing the Dark Side is more straight forward, but the majority of the influence rewards depend on light side actions. In very general terms, dark side characters have an easier time playing through the game, but have a harder time learning the back story.

There are more force powers in *KotOR2*, and the workbench system has been expanded and improved. On the other hand, the cut scenes and dialogue trees have more stutters than those in the first game. There are also several game play glitches, none of which ruin the story, they do allow players to earn more experience points or money at certain points than the designers intended. Overall, *KotOR2*'s greatest strength and greatest weakness are the same thing. It is basically the first game all over again, only different this time.

Speaking of sequels to all time top 10 games, ***Half-Life 2*** is the much-longer-in-the-making follow-up to Valve's original classic. A long time in the making originally, the game was delayed an additional 18 months after a hacker stole its source code. What Valve did to the game during those months is unclear, but despite (because of?) all the delays, *HL2* has a state-of-the-art graphics engine that looks better than anything this side of *Doom 3* on a high end computer. Players with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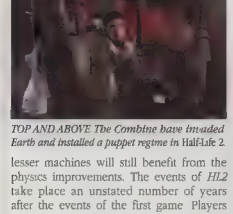


TOP AND ABOVE The Combine have invaded Earth and installed a puppet regime in Half-Life 2.

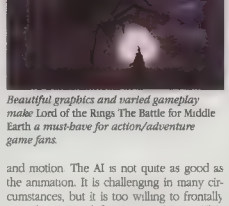
lesser machines will still benefit from the physics improvements. The events of *HL2* take place an unstated number of years after the events of the first game. Players take the role of Gordon Freeman again, returned to Earth after working for the mysterious guy in the suit in *HL1*. In the character's absence, aliens known as the Combine have conquered Earth and installed a human puppet régime. It is the player's job to free the planet, pretty much one bullet at a time.

There is a chase near the beginning of *HL2* that sets the game's tone and gives players the right impression of the rest of the game. The whole game is from Freeman's perspective, and while there is interaction with other characters, there are no cut scenes or any jumps in time or place to take the player out of the atmosphere of the game. The game play is in the standard first-person shooter mode of gathering better and more varied weapons while meeting progressively stranger and more powerful enemies, but just like the first game, *HL2* does a great job of creating an atmosphere and immersing the player in the game world.

Lord of the Rings: The Battle for Middle Earth isn't a direct sequel. Instead it is one of a series of games spawned by Peter Jackson's movies that have sought to allow players to re-experience those films. In *BfME*, the player experiences commanding the vast armies that clashed in battle after battle in the trilogy. From the Mines of Moria to Helm's Deep to the Gates of Mordor, all the conflicts are portrayed. The player is in charge and the outcomes can be changed. Boromir can be saved from the orcs, for example.

The game has two different single-player campaigns and an online mode for when players want to pit their skills against other people. For the Good campaign, players can control either the calvary-based Riders of Rohan or the fortification-dependent Men of Gondor. For the Evil campaign, players can control either the endless number of Sauron's orks or the fewer but tougher Uruk-hai. In addition, each side gets heroes and magical powers to help in its struggles.

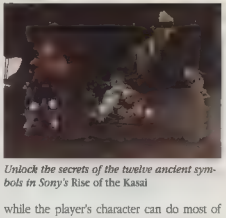
The most impressive part of *BfME* is the graphics. There is both a strategic map on which the armies move across Middle Earth as well as many tactical maps of battle locations. The detail and animation on display on all these maps carries right on into the character models of the various units. Horses rear, trolls lumber, catapults jerk, and walls fall. The battles are alive with sound and motion. The AI is not quite as good as the animation. It is challenging in many circumstances, but it is too willing to frontally assault strong defensive positions. This defect in game play is more than offset by the plyers ability to save where he wants instead of being restricted to just a few save points—a rare and wonderful thing in real-time strategy game.



Beautiful graphics and varied gameplay make Lord of the Rings The Battle for Middle Earth *a must-have for action/adventure game fans.*

A different sort of curse battled on a much more intimate scale is on view in ***The Rise of the Kasai***, the sequel to Sony's innovative action game *The Mark of Kri*. Instead of a ring, the dread power in this world is contained in 12 symbols that guardians pass down as tattoos from generation to generation, a process that has been going on so long that the guardians have forgotten why it happens. *RotK* explores that mystery by taking the player through events 10 years before and 10 years after *MoK*.

There are four playable characters in *RotK*. Rau, who returns from the first game, is joined in the post-*MoK* missions by his sister, Tati, who is afflicted with one of the tattoos. In the early missions, players can play Baumusu, who was Rau's teacher in the first game, or Griz, an elder warrior who also bears a tattoo, but who has mastered its powers. Every level consists of two characters facing the curse at once, the player controlling one character and the computer running the other. The levels are built so that



Unlock the secrets of the twelve ancient symbols in Sony's Rise of the Kasai

while the player's character can do most of the heavy lifting, the second character is required to finish things.

The innovative combat system employed by *MoK* is back in *RotK*. The player controls a targeting beam with the right joystick. When the beam passes over an enemy, that enemy is assigned a button on the controller. This allows the player to attack that enemy by hitting its assigned button. This system shines when one of the characters is surrounded by foes. Simple button presses allow the player to fight them all at once, alternating targets with each blow. Combined with a big variety of combos and finishing moves, each different for each character, it is easy to play all 10 levels without all the fighting becoming a grind.

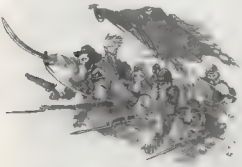
Unlike video games, paper and dice role-playing games don't have sequels. Instead, they have editions. ***Ars Magica***, one of the best paper and dice RPGS, is now on its fifth edition. Nothing has changed in the setting or the core mechanics of the game since the first edition in the late 1980s, but there have been numerous tweeks and revisions to both, and this fifth edition adds a few more. For players who have never participated in an *AM* saga, these changes make no difference, they will simply learn and enjoy the game as it is now. Players currently playing a saga who want to change to this edition will find some problems in the conversion process, but overall it will be worth the trouble.

AM is set in "Mythic Europe," which is the historical 13th-century Europe, except that all the magic, faeries, monsters, and demons that people of that time believed were real actually are real in the game. Players take the role of a group of wizards living together in a retreat, called a Covenant, with their retainers and companions. The wizards are part of continent-wide organization called the Order of Hermes, which promotes the study of magic and discourages wizards from meddling in human affairs.

The heart of *AM* is its encompassing magic system and its troupe-style play. The magic system allows the wizard characters to create nearly any effect they have the time and materials to cast. The troupe play means each player has several characters, with their wizard being the focus and the

others being built to support other players, wizards. This allows all the players to be involved, by running their support characters, even when the adventure is tailored to just one of the wizards. Changed for this edition is the mundane combat system. The one-on-one flavor has been streamlined and a squad-based system has been added to allow larger engagements. All in all, it remains one of the most compelling RPGS ever created.

Moving from the 13th century to the 19th, ***Masque of the Red Death: Adventures on Gothic Earth*** is a campaign supplement for the *Ravenloft* flavor of the d20 rules. *MotRD* is set in a historical 1890s world except that magic is real, and a great evil called the Red Death has been around for centuries, trying to spread death and chaos among mankind. This is the world where the stories of Arthur Conan Doyle and Edgar



Set in the 1890's, Masque of the Red Death Adventures on Gothic Earth *makes for an entertaining campaign supplement to the* Ravenloft *flavor of the d20 rules.*

Allen Poe could be real.

At 282 pages long, *MotRD* tries its best to be a complete resource for adventuring in this world, but players will also need the base *Ravenloft* book and would benefit from having the *Ravenloft* monster manual as well. On the other hand, *MotRD* does provide a lot of the information and background for the era, everything from list of inventions to defining a buttonhook. No book is ever enough in an RPG campaign, it is inherent in players to find a need for information that the GM doesn't have in their source books, but *MotRD* gives GMs a fighting chance to answer most of the questions that will come their way.

In all, the book contains seven chapters, four appendixes, and an index. There are nine new prestige classes including Antiquarian, Master Inventor, and Qabalist, the last being a sort of magic user who is a member of and a historian of secret magical societies. The magic chapter goes into great depth to provide the rules, background, and atmosphere for how magic works on *Gothic Earth* and then has 15 pages detailing how spells in the other d20 books work there. There isn't a fully drawn up adventure, but there are three mini-ones and lots of adventure hooks throughout. ▶

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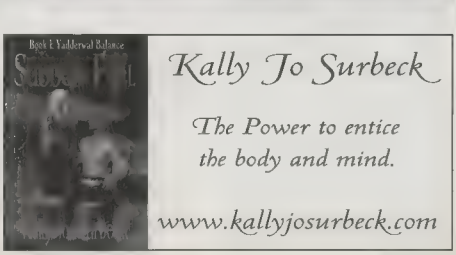

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Movies

Continued from page 22

moment, Ted removes a human tooth from the wound. Ted examines the gun. It's made of flesh and bone—and loaded with a clip of human teeth. Because the gun has no metal, it slipped past security.

Allegra finds her game has been damaged, and she needs a friendly player to save it. She learns Ted is a game virgin—he has no spinal port—but she needs him. Together, they descend into a world of the absurd and the grotesque.

Flatliners (1990) opens as medical student Nelson Wright (played by Kiefer Sutherland of *Phone Booth*, TV's *24*) faces sunrise, saying, "Today is a good day to die."

The fact is, Nelson is just one of a group of med students convinced they can gain fame and fortune or simply answer the haunting question of what happens after death. To do so, one of them must die for a minute. The plan is to kill Nelson so that he's brain dead—he flatlines. They figure a minute of death will be enough for Nelson to find out if there's anything on the other side, and then they'll bring him back to life. Reviving Nelson turns out to be tougher than anyone thought, but it works.

Nelson's after-death experience seems uneventful. He floats over hills and fields, finding children at play. Once revived, he sees the ghost of his childhood pet, which portends events that gradually become more and more terrifying.

While Nelson keeps quiet about this aftershock, his friends take the plunge into death, one by one, flatlining longer each time. Like Nelson, his friends begin having strange and inexplicable post-death experiences, while Nelson is haunted by a ghost that leaves him battered and bruised. He becomes convinced that as they each flatline and then come back to life, they bring their sins back with them. As he sees his friends plagued by ghosts and inexplicable occurrences, Nelson decides to take desperate measures to set things right.

Flatliners is directed by Joel Schumacher (*Tigerland, Batman and Robin*) and stars Julia Roberts (*America's Sweethearts, Erin Brockovich*), Kevin Bacon (*The Hollow Man, Stir of Echoes*), William Baldwin (*Sliver, Backdraft*), and Oliver Platt (*Don't Say a Word*, TV's *The West Wing*).

Vanilla Sky (2001) is writer/director Cameron Crowe's (*Almost Famous, Jerry Maguire*) remake of the foreign film, *Abre Los Ojos* (translation: Open Your Eyes). It's a story threaded with dreams—but the difference between dreams and reality is often unclear.

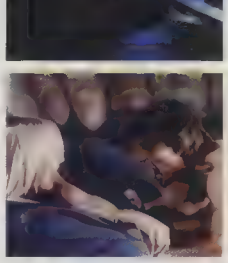
David Aames (played by Tom Cruise of *Minority Report, Mission: Impossible*) has the world on a string. He's inherited a magazine empire from his dead parents. He's rich and powerful. He has a casual sexual friendship with beautiful Julie (played by Cameron Diaz of *My Best Friend's Wedding, There's Something About Mary*). Steven Spielberg (playing himself) shows up at David's birthday party. Even when David steals away his best friend's date, Sophia (played by Penelope Cruz of *Blow, Captain Corelli's Mandolin*), he gets away with it.

But then he makes a bad decision.

After spending enough time with Sophia to realize he may be falling in love with her, David walks to his car and Julie pulls up beside him. She knows he's seeing Sophia, and Julie's jealous enough to stalk him. Julie convinces David to hook up with her one more time. David gives in, and he quickly realizes he's made the biggest mistake of his life as Julie drives recklessly, acting as if she's gone over her emotional edge.

Julie crashes the car and dies, but David survives with extreme injuries, including a mangled face. He soon winds up in a psychiatric ward where he's questioned for murder.

Vanilla Sky, referencing the sky in an Impressionist painting, flirts with time and the fantasies of the mind, interweaving them into a story about a man challenged with an opportunity to live his best life with hope and integrity.



TOP Willem Dafoe stars as a man drawn into a game which becomes reality in eXistenZ. *ABOVE Tom Cruise as the vain David Ames in Cameron Crowe's* Vanilla Sky

Books

Continued from page 29

are unmistakably fantastic. Phillips's writing is intensely lyrical and evocative, though sometimes marred by a hint of preciousness, a phrase or metaphor too diligently honed or sought after, which rises too far above its surroundings and reminds us of the writer behind the curtain who steps forward at such times to take a bow. The lush and fevered stylings of Elizabeth Hand come frequently to mind, suggesting an influence from which the author has not yet fought her way completely free. But I can think of worse influences to be laboring under! Phillips is clearly a writer to watch.

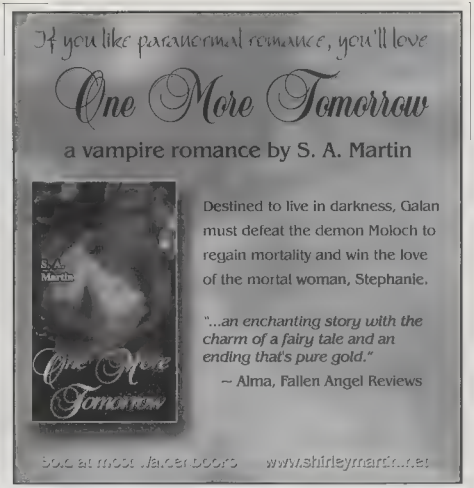
Baneweaker, Volume One of The Sundering, Jacqueline Carey, TOR, New York, hardcover, 431 pp, $27.95, ISBN 0-765-30521-6.

Jacqueline Carey's popular *Kushiel* trilogy was notable for lush prose, sudden plot twists, and a seductive blend of romance, adventure, and eroticism. So divergent is *Baneweaker* from its predecessors in style and accomplishment, and so derivative of Tolkien–even while seeking to put a Gnostic spin on his mythos–that I couldn't help wondering if, though published after the *Kushiel* books, it had been written earlier.

Long ago, a divine being called Uru Aat killed itself to give birth to the world and the gods known as the Seven Shapers, whose task it was to shape the newborn world and its inhabitants, among them men, troll-like beings known as Fjeltroll, were-creatures known as Were, and elflike beings called Ellylon.

A series of wars leaves one god, Satoris, marooned on the continent of Urulat (by no means the last or least annoying rip-off of Tolkien) while his six siblings dwell across the Sundering Sea on an island called Torath. Satoris is viewed as evil both by men and the Ellylon of Urulat, known as the Rivenlost, but Carey telegraphs a different, if trite, truth: the real evil is Satoris's supposedly good elder brother Haomane, Lord of Thought, first and foremost of the Shapers. Now a third and final war is about to take place in accordance with an ancient prophecy that promises the defeat of Satoris and involves the marriage of a princess of the elves, I mean *Ellylon*, called Celeborn, I mean *Cerelinde*, to the last High King of Men, Aragorn, er, *Aracus*. Satoris's immortal human servant, Tanaros Blacksword, who murdered his wife and her lover a thousand years ago, and who has yet to wring every drop of angst from the crime—though not for lack of trying—kidnaps Cerelinde and brings her to Darkhaven, where Satoris dwells in, um, darkness. Publication of this stinker reflects badly on all concerned. ♦

Paul Witcover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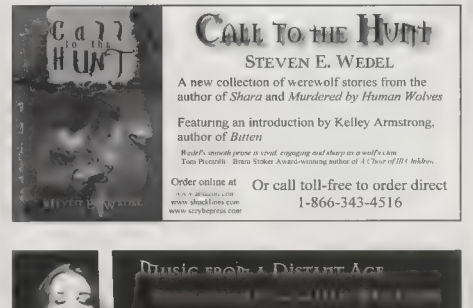
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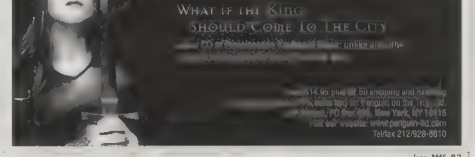

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Fox Tails

Continued from page 53

was destined that either I or Lady Akiko would not leave this clearing alive. Her solution to the problem of Doshi was quite elegant, but you were an obstacle to that solution and, once you found me, so was I."

"Which explains why she went to so much trouble trying to prevent me from finding you in the first place. Was she correct then? Won't Doshi be a danger to the family now?"

"Yes," said Lady Kuzunoha frankly. "Yet my husband already knows that. Perhaps not how great a risk, I concede, but I don't think that would deter him. Do you?"

I finished cleaning my sword and slid it back into its scabbard. "No, but as grateful as he's going to be at the return of his son, Lord Abe is going to be considerably less so when I explain what happened to his mother, proxy or no."

Lady Kuzunoha covered her mouth as she smiled. "Yamada-san, perhaps there is an elegant solution to this as well. For now, kindly produce my lord's proxy seal and we'll go fetch my son."

That proved easily done. The presence of both the seal and Lady Kuzunoha herself was more than enough to send one of the shrine priests scurrying ahead of us to a small outbuilding near a koi pond. There we found Doshi in the care of a rather frightened-looking wet nurse. Lady Kuzunoha paid off the poor woman generously, thanked her for her solicitude, and sent her on her way. The baby looked up, lifting its little arms and gurgling happily, as Lady Kuzunoha smiled down at him.

"Probably time you were weaned, my son." She turned to me. "Please take him, Yamada-san. You'll need to get him back to his father quickly; he'll have to make his own arrangements for Doshi's care. I will give you some writing to take to my husband before you leave."

I hesitated. "Don't ... don't you wish to hold your son? This may well be your last chance."

She smiled a sad smile. "Thank you for that offer, but I can only echo the words of my lord in this, Yamada-san. If I held him again, what makes you think I could let him go?"

I had no answer to that, but I did have one last question. "One thing still bothers me: you were unable to maintain the deception of being human, but Lady Akiko had been in the family much longer than you. How did she manage?"

Lady Kuzunoha laughed softly. "Yamada-san, as I told you before: the mask will slip, and we cannot control when or how. For me, my right hand would turn into a paw without warning. For Lady Akiko, it was her scent."

I blinked. "Scent?"

She nodded. "Her true scent, as a fox. But the human nose is a poor tool at best. Those close to her would either miss the scent entirely or at worst mistake it for ... something else," she finished, delicately. "Lady Akiko was simply luckier than I was."

That may have been so, but Lady Akiko's luck had finally run out. I was afraid that mine was about to do the same.

LORD ABE RECEIVED ME IN HIS PRIvate chambers after I placed his infant son back in the care of his servants.

"Yamada-san, I am in your debt," he said. "I-I trust Lady Kuzunoha was not ... difficult?"

From my kneeling position, I touched my forehead to the floor. "That relates to a matter I need to speak of. Lady Kuzunoha was quite reluctant, as you can imagine, but I was impertinent enough to acquire the assistance of Lady Akiko in this. They spoke, mother to mother, and Lady Akiko persuaded her."

"*I see.*"

I could tell that he didn't see at all, but the die was already cast. I produced the scroll Lady Kuzunoha had supplied. "Lady Akiko told me of the ... differences, between your wife and herself. That her intense desire to protect the family's name had perhaps blinded her to Lady Kuzunoha's virtues. To atone for this—and other burdens—she has decided to renounce the world and join a temple as a nun. She also sent a personal message to you."

Lord Abe was a Gentleman of the Court, whatever else he might be. He concealed his shock and surprise very well. He took the scroll I offered and unrolled it in silence. He remained intent on what was written there for several moments longer than would have been required to actually read the words. I tried not to hold my breath.

"My mother's script," he said, almost to himself. "Perfect." He looked down at me, his expression unreadable. "I don't suppose my mother revealed to you which temple she had chosen to join?"

I bowed again. "She did not so confide in me, my lord, though I had the impression it was quite far from here. She seemed to feel that was for the best. She hoped you would understand."

He grunted. "Perhaps she is right about both. Well then, Yamada-san. I've lost both my wife and my mother, but I have not yet lost all. It seems I must be content with that."

I breathed a little easier once I'd been paid and was safely off the grounds. I wasn't sure how much of my story Lord Abe really believed but, if he didn't realize full well that Lady Kuzunoha had written that message, I'm no judge of men. Perhaps that was another choice he made. As for myself, I chose to be elsewhere for a good long time. Hokkaido sounded best; I'd heard that it's very sparsely populated and only a little frozen at this time of the year. But first I went to meet Kenji by the Demon Gate, since I'd given my word and now I owed him a drink.

I owed myself several more. ❧

Stones in Winter

Continued from page 80

Arnora's head roared. Beyond the sound of the blood in her ears she heard screaming, and wind, and thunder, and horses. The sky was dying, the sunset blotted out by dark, reddened clouds. Her people were dying.

She kept hold of the sword, but used that same hand to grope for the bottom edge of the southerner's mail shirt. With the ends of two fingers she lifted it up. Then she pulled the knife out of her waist with the other hand and plunged the knife into his flesh.

He gasped and she stabbed him again. He bellowed with rage and squeezed her neck harder. She tried to put the knife into him again, but now he held her away from him like a small dog.

She kicked, but that did no good. Her vision was failing.

He raised his sword above his head, then dropped it toward her, and she barely managed to push it away from her face with her own blade. He staggered, but still held onto her.

Finally she dropped the knife. Using both hands to move the sword, she poked it at his right knee, and felt it hit something.

He dropped her, and she fell onto her haunches, then onto her back, coughing.

Wind rushed through the battlefield. Fewer men screamed now, and they screamed from farther away. The fight was ending. But the roar from the sky had become a torrent of sound.

She looked up, still gasping. The man she had been trying to kill stared at her and fell to his knees, his lap filled with blood. Her knife lay on the ground between them. She lunged for it, but he had already picked it up.

She turned to her sword and scrambled to her feet. She raised the blade.

Moving his arm half sideways toward her, the southerner plunged his own sword into her belly and yanked it out again. Then he fell over and lay without moving, his gaze fixed on something near her feet.

Arnora swayed. Strange pains filled her body, but she stayed on her feet and kept her sword with her. She would need it, she knew, where she was going.

Horses. Horses all around her, with dead men slumped on their withers.

She half lifted the sword in salute with both hands, and smiled.

"Hail, Valkyries," she said. "I am killed."

They stared down at her. There was the one who had first borne her away from the battlefield, sitting silent on her tall horse, and there was the dark-haired tormentor, and there were all the others. Fire streamed from their eyes.

"Hail, mortal," said one she did not recognize. "Sleep in darkness with the rest of your kind."

Arnora lifted her chin. A heavy warmth had filled her chest, and her hands felt cold, like winter stones. It was hard to breathe now.

"I have taken vengeance, and I have killed bravely," she said, dragging each breath into her lungs. "I slew my enemy to defend my people, as you would have your warriors defend the gods when time ends. I am dead in battle as all your heroes are. As Gudmund is. Was this not my fate, as I predicted?"

The dark-haired one pulled at the reins, and her horse pranced.

"Predicted or not, your fate does not matter," she said. "Did you not see? We take only men, and you are a woman."

The sunset, almost obscured, lit the Valkyrie's hair from behind.

"As are you," said Arnora, and swept her sword up in a single motion, hacking the Valkyrie's arm off.

She heard a scream that filled all the air. The horses reared. She fell to the ground, unable to move.

Someone was near her. She looked up.

It was the Valkyrie to whose back she had clung after the first battle, riding into the sky. Arnora studied her face, no longer afraid, but it remained the face of an immortal being, beyond her understanding.

The other horses swirled about them, thundering away. One, however, remained.

There was still sunlight left. It glinted off the Valkyrie's blade as the golden metal came down toward Arnora, slantwise in the air. The blow was too fast to jerk away from, even if she had tried. The rays filled her eyes with light.

And as she felt the hard blade cut her apart from her life, she thought, *I was not afraid. I loved Gudmund so much that I became him. I became my brother. I am smaller than these men, but I am just like them. It was … my fate.*

She could hear the thunder now, getting nearer again. A great thunder of hooves.

She sat up. Light still overwhelmed her eyes, and she put her hand up against it. But someone else's hand grasped hers. A form stood in front of her, blocking the light for her.

She looked up, then pressed the hand in return.

When they had ridden together along the cliffs, his hands had been warm. When she had touched him after his death, he had been cold. Now their hands were the same, feeling neither warm nor cold to each other.

But when they lay together on the hard soil above the sea, he had been silhouetted against the sun, just like this. And he had been beautiful, as he was now.

Cold or warm or neither, he was Gudmund.

"Time to feast, my love," he said, "before we fight." ❧

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The Storyteller's Wife

Continued from page 38

freely?"

"Why not? I'd still get to hear them. I don't mind sharing."

Nicnivin smiled, the look of soft hope unexpected on her regal face. "Take this." She handed Janie an emerald-green sprig covered in crimson berries.

"There are twice seven fruits and twice seven leaves on this bough. Every day, steep a tea from one leaf and one fruit and have your man sip it. It will not heal him; he will not be able to dance or walk again. But it will slow the sickness that festers in him, and it will stop the pain. I will give Hobs a new bough every fortnight. It will have as many fruits as stories your Thomas gives us."

Janie clasped the delicate branch in her hands. "A story a day—"

"Keeps the medicine man away," Nicnivin finished. "Now ask me twice more, and I will send you home."

"Give me back my husband and return us to the real world," Janie said.

"Two," Hobs said.

"Give me back my husband and return us to the real world!" Janie cried.

"Three."

Janie looked up from the berry-laden bough that rested in a vase on the dining table. "Tom?"

The silence stretched and for a despair-filled moment Janie wondered if the Queen had reneged on their deal.

But then Tom turned a corner in his wheelchair, his hair disheveled and his eyes bleary. He wore only his purple shamrock boxers. "You're home earlier than I thought," he said. "I nodded off. Had the neatest dream."

Janie flung her arms around her husband's shoulders and kissed his face. "I missed you so much!"

Tom laughed and hugged her close. "Silly girl. You were only gone for half a day. And how was your last day at work?"

"You wouldn't believe how hard it was."

"Still want me to tell you a story?"

"Oh, yes, definitely. But hang on a minute." Janie ran to the window that overlooked their backyard. Opening it wide, she peered out.

"Hsst." Hobs waved at her from beneath the sill. He held a shining soap bubble in his other hand.

She waved back. Turning, she saw Tom watching her with a bemused look.

"What're you doing, honey?" he asked.

"Just opening the window. After your story, I've got one to tell you for a change. I hope you like the ending."

Tom smiled. "Of course I will. I love you, y'know." ❧

Deliverance

Continued from page 45

rolling around on the beach is nowhere near as romantic as TV implied. At least, not the beaches of Lake Michigan, where the smell of dead perch permeated the sand. I smiled at the memory.

I had heard nothing from Jennifer for three weeks. She screened her calls and refused to come to the door. When I called her work, they said she hadn't been in.

Claire was visibly smaller. She squinted, and her eyes darted from side to side, struggling to focus. Her joints bulged, giving the impression of arthritis, but her hands moved smoothly as she asked, "Has Jennifer called?"

I shook my head, and she looked away.

The skin around her waist was so taut I could see the baby moving. Only a vague outline, but enough to know it had turned in the womb. "You're almost there," I said. "Stay strong. We're going to get through this."

Claire smiled and started to respond when her body stiffened and fell. I reached for her, then forced myself to stop. If I touched her, it could do more harm than good. The thump of her body … of our child … hitting the ground made my eyes water.

Claire recovered a few minutes later. Her seizures had grown briefer, but far more frequent. She called them her contractions.

"You're going to be ok," I said as I helped her to the couch.

Her hands cradled her stomach, and her eyes were wide. She looked frightened. "Terry…."

"I'm right here." She couldn't see me. I waved my hands in front of her eyes. I wanted to shout, for all the good it would do. "Claire, please." I wasn't sure what I was asking her.

Whatever was happening, it was hurting her. Her hands sank into the cushions, and her mouth was round. I wondered again if Jennifer had been right. I could have stopped this weeks ago. Months ago.

And then Claire smiled. She lowered her head, as if she could see into her own body. It was a joyful expression I had never seen before, not even on our wedding day. Tears left silver streaks down her cheeks. "You're going to be ok."

I didn't know if she meant me or the child, but I started to cry. She looked around, reaching blindly until she touched my shoulder.

"Terry."

"I'm right here," I whispered, knowing she couldn't hear. "I'm not going anywhere."

She grimaced again as another seizure took her. I could see the child's body straining against her skin. "She's scared," Claire signed. "She needs your help."

I knew what she was asking. Her body wasn't solid enough to expel a child, and the child wasn't strong enough to force its way out. To force her way out. I blinked, trying to clear my vision. "I love you," I said, just as Claire raised her other hand, saying the same thing in ASL I smiled despite myself.

Claire's body tightened again. I started to reach out, then changed my mind. I remembered the first time I had touched her during a seizure, the way her skin had collapsed at the contact.

Tears fell freely as I closed my eyes and leaned forward. It was the gentlest kiss I had ever given.

For a moment, I felt her lips pressing against mine, even in the midst of her seizure. I tried to hope. Maybe she really was strong enough. Maybe everything would work out, like the fairy tales that end with that perfect, loving kiss. And then the pressure disappeared.

I kept my eyes closed until I was sure she was gone. Only then did I take the afghan from the couch and begin to wipe our crying child clean.

I knocked again. "Jennifer, it's me."

There must have been something in my voice. I heard footsteps, and then the door swung inward.

Jennifer's face was pale, and I hardly recognized her without her make-up. Even before I could speak, she started to cry.

I shifted Rose in my arms. Her tiny eyes squeezed tighter against the light.

"I named her Rose Claire," I said softly.

Slowly, Jennifer nodded. She hadn't taken her eyes off the baby.

"It happened Tuesday. Claire … she looked content."

Jennifer made a choking sound in her throat. "She's got your eyes."

"I need your help." I ran a finger down Rose's round cheek. "The hospital wants to know who the mother is. They don't even want to issue a birth certificate. I don't blame you for hating me, but…."

"I understand." She smiled shakily. "My boyfriend will be pissed, but I can do this. For her. And for Claire." She reached out, and her fingers shook. When she touched Rose's arm, it was like she expected the baby to disappear.

"I want her to know you," I said. "She deserves a family." I tensed, waiting for Jennifer to shout, to tell me that what Rose deserved was her real mother.

But Jennifer simply swallowed and said, "Yeah, she does. I can tell her about Claire. When she's older."

"We'll both tell her," I agreed. Rose stirred again. "Can I come in for a minute? She's going to want a bottle soon."

Jennifer moved to one side.

"Thank you." I held Rose tight against my chest as Jennifer shut the door behind us, then dug the formula from the diaper bag.

Rose kept crying. A loud, angry cry, full of hunger. Full of life.

At that moment, it was the most beautiful sound in the world. ❧

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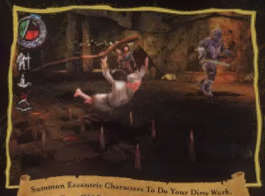

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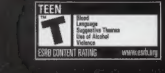

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